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The Changing American Family

Read Their Stories

American households have never been more diverse, more surprising, more baffling. In this special issue of *Science Times*, NATALIE ANGIER takes stock of our changing definition of family.



Harini Indrakrishnan, a high school senior, was born in the United States. Her parents, from Sri Lanka, became American citizens a decade ago. David Walter Banks for The New York Times

E-MAIL

By [NATALIE ANGIER](#)

NOVEMBER 25, 2013

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CHELSEA, MICH. — Kristi and Michael Burns have a lot in common. They love crossword puzzles, football, going to museums and reading five or six books at a time. They describe themselves as mild-mannered introverts who suffer from an array of chronic medical problems. The two share similar marital résumés, too. On their wedding day in 2011, the groom was 43 years old and the bride 39, yet it was marriage No. 3 for both.

Today, their blended family is a sprawling, sometimes uneasy ensemble of two sharp-eyed sons from her two previous husbands, a daughter and son from his second marriage, ex-spouses of varying

degrees of involvement, the partners of ex-spouses, the bemused in-laws and a kitten named Agnes that likes to sleep on computer keyboards.

If the Burnses seem atypical as an American nuclear family, how about the Schulte-Waysers, a merry band of two married dads, six kids and two dogs? Or the Indrakrishnans, a successful immigrant couple in Atlanta whose teenage daughter divides her time between prosaic homework and the precision footwork of ancient Hindu dance; the Glusacs of Los Angeles, with their two nearly grown children and their litany of middle-class challenges that seem like minor sagas; Ana Perez and Julian Hill of Harlem, unmarried and just getting by, but with Warren Buffett-size dreams for their three young children; and the alarming number of families with incarcerated parents, a sorry byproduct of America's status as the [world's leading jailer](#).

The typical American family, if it ever lived anywhere but on [Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving canvas](#), has become as multilayered and full of surprises as a holiday turducken — the all-American seasonal portmanteau of deboned turkey, duck and chicken.

Researchers who study the structure and evolution of the American family express unsullied astonishment at how rapidly the family has changed in recent years, the transformations often exceeding or capsizing those same experts' predictions of just a few journal articles ago.

Advertisement





Kristi and Michael Burns, whose marriage was the third for each, with three of their four children at home in Chelsea, Mich. All are from previous relationships. Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

“This churning, this turnover in our intimate partnerships is creating complex families on a scale we’ve not seen before,” said [Andrew J. Cherlin](#), a professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University. “It’s a mistake to think this is the endpoint of enormous change. We are still very much in the midst of it.”

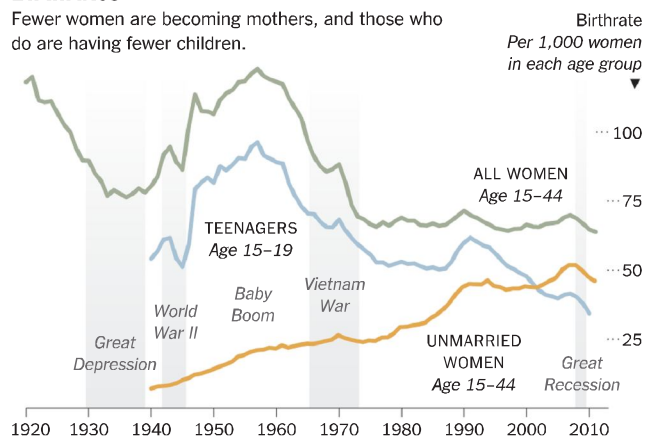
Yet for all the restless shape-shifting of the American family, researchers who comb through census, survey and historical data and conduct field studies of ordinary home life have identified a number of key emerging themes.

Families, they say, are becoming more socially egalitarian over all, even as economic disparities widen. Families are more ethnically, racially, religiously and stylistically diverse than half a generation ago — than even half a year ago.

In increasing numbers, blacks marry whites, atheists marry Baptists, men marry men and women women,

Birthrates

Fewer women are becoming mothers, and those who do are having fewer children.



More than 40 percent of American babies are now born to unmarried women, mostly women in their 20s and early 30s.



Democrats marry Republicans and start talk shows. Good friends join forces as part of the “voluntary kin” movement, sharing medical directives, wills, even adopting one another legally.

Single people live alone and proudly consider themselves families of one — more generous and civic-minded than so-called “greedy marrieds.”

“There are really good studies showing that single people are more likely than married couples to be in touch with friends, neighbors, siblings and parents,” said [Bella DePaulo](#), author of “Singled Out” and a visiting professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

But that doesn’t mean they’ll be single forever. “There are not just more types of families and living arrangements than there used to be,” said [Stephanie Coontz](#), author of the coming book “Intimate Revolutions,” and a social historian at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash. “Most people will move through several different types over the course of their lives.”

At the same time, the old-fashioned family plan of stably married parents residing with their children remains a source of considerable power in America — but one that is increasingly seen as out of reach to all but the educated elite.

“We’re seeing a class divide not only between the haves and the have-nots, but between the I do’s and the I do nots,” Dr. Coontz said. Those who are enjoying the perks of a good marriage “wouldn’t stand for any other kind,” she said, while those who would benefit most from marital stability “are the ones least likely to have the resources to sustain it.”

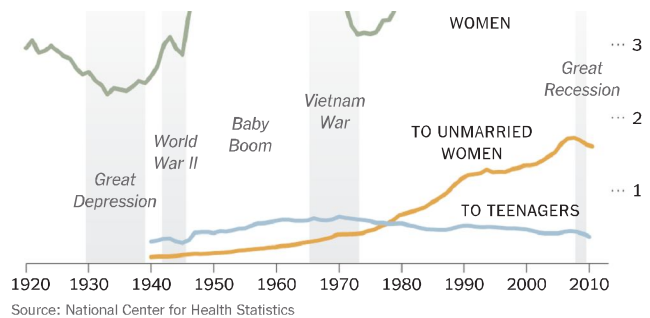
Yet across the divide runs a white picket fence, our unshakable star-spangled belief in the value of marriage and family. We marry, divorce and remarry at rates not seen anywhere else in the developed world. We lavish [\\$70 billion a year on weddings](#), more than we spend on [pets](#), coffee, toothpaste and toilet paper combined.

We’re sappy family romantics. When an informal sample of 52 Americans of different ages, professions and hometowns were asked the first thought that came to mind on hearing the word “family,” the answers varied hardly at all. Love! Kids! Mom! Dinner!

“It’s the backbone of how we live,” said David Anderson, 52, an insurance claims adjuster from Chicago. “It means everything,” said Linda McAdam, 28, who is in human resources on Long Island.

Yes, everything, and sometimes too many things. “It’s almost like a weight,” said Rob Fee, 26, a financial analyst in San Francisco, “a heavy weight.” Or as the comedian George Burns said, “Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.”

In charting the differences between today’s families and those of the past, demographers start with the kids — or rather the lack of them.



The nation's birthrate today is [half what it was in 1960](#), and last year hit [its lowest point ever](#). At the end of the baby boom, in 1964, 36 percent of all Americans were under 18 years old; last year, children [accounted for just 23.5 percent of the population](#), and the proportion is dropping, to a projected 21 percent by 2050. Fewer women are becoming mothers — about 80 percent of those of childbearing age today versus 90 percent in the 1970s — and those who reproduce do so more sparingly, averaging two children apiece now, compared with three in the 1970s.

One big reason is the soaring cost of ushering offspring to functional independence. According to the Department of Agriculture, the average middle-class couple will spend [\\$241,080](#) to raise a child to age 18. Factor in four years of college and maybe graduate school, or a parentally subsidized internship with the local theater company, and say hello to your million-dollar bundle of oh joy.

As steep as the fertility decline has been, the marriage rate has fallen more sharply, particularly among young women, who do most of the nation's childbearing. As a result, 41 percent of babies are now born out of wedlock, a fourfold increase since 1970.

The trend is not demographically uniform, instead tracking the nation's widening gap in income and opportunity. Among women with a bachelor's degrees or higher, 90 percent adhere to the old playground song and put marriage before a baby carriage. For everybody else, maternity is often decoupled from matrimony: 40 percent of women with some college but no degree, and 57 percent of women with high school diplomas or less, are unmarried when they give birth to their first child.

More than one-quarter of these unwed mothers are living with a partner who may or may not be their child's biological father. The rise of the cohabiting couple is another striking feature of the evolving American family: From 1996 to 2012, the number jumped almost 170 percent, to 7.8 million from 2.9 million.

Nor are unmarried mothers typically in their teens; contrary to all the talk of an epidemic of teenage motherhood, the birthrate among adolescent girls has dropped by nearly half since 1991 and last year hit an all-time low, a public health triumph that experts attribute to better sex education and birth-control methods. Most unmarried mothers today, demographers say, are in their 20s and early 30s.

Also démodé is the old debate over whether mothers of dependent children should work outside the home. The facts have voted, the issue is settled, and Paycheck Mommy is now a central organizing principle of the modern American family.

The share of mothers employed full or part time has quadrupled since the 1950s and today accounts for nearly three-quarters of women with children at home. The number of women who are their families' sole or primary breadwinner also has soared, to 40 percent today from 11 percent in 1960.

"Yes, I wear the pants in the family," said Ana Perez, 35, a mother of three and a vice president at a financial services company in New York, who was, indeed, wearing pants. "I can say it brings me joy to know I can take care of my family."

Cultural attitudes are adapting accordingly. Sixty-two percent of the public, and 72 percent of adults under 30, [view the ideal marriage](#) as one in which husband and wife

both work and share child care and household duties; back when Jimmy Carter was president, less than half of the population approved of the dual-income family, and less than half of 1 percent of husbands knew how to operate a sponge mop.

Mothers are bringing home more of the bacon, and of the mortarboards, too. While most couples are an even match scholastically, 28 percent of married women are better educated than their mates; that is true of just 19 percent of married men. Forty years ago, the asymmetry went the other way.

Some experts argue that the growing legion of mothers with advanced degrees has helped sharpen the already brutal competition for admission to the nation's elite universities, which stress the importance of extracurricular activities. Nothing predicts the breadth and busyness of a child's after-school schedule better, it turns out, than the mother's level of education.

One change that caught many family researchers by surprise was the recent dip in the divorce rate. After many decades of upward march, followed by a long, stubborn stay at the familiar 50 percent mark that made every nuptial feel like a coin flip, the rate began falling in 1996 and is now just above 40 percent for first-time marriages.

The decline has been even more striking among middle- and upper-middle-income couples with college degrees. For them, fewer than one in three marriages is expected to end in divorce, a degree of stability that allows elite couples to merge their resources with confidence, maximally invest in their children and otherwise widen the gap between themselves and the struggling masses.

There are exceptions, of course. Among baby boomers, the rate of marriage failure has surged 50 percent in the past 20 years — perhaps out of an irritable nostalgia, researchers said, for the days of free love, better love, anything but this love. Nor do divorce rates appear to have fallen among those who take the old Samuel Johnson quip as a prescription, allowing hope to triumph over experience, and marrying again and again.

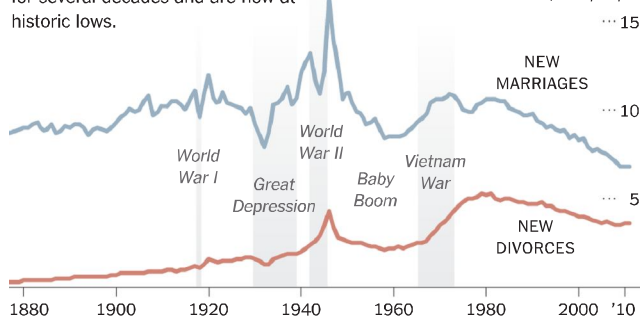
For both Mike and Kristi Burns, now in their 40s, the first marriage came young and left early, and the second stuck around for more than a dozen years.

Kristi was 19, living in South Carolina, and her Marine boyfriend was about to be shipped to Japan. "I wasn't attached to him, really," she said, "but for some reason I felt this might be my only chance at marriage."

Marriage and Divorce

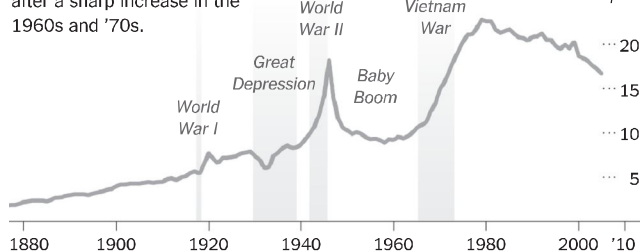
Marriage rates have been falling for several decades and are now at historic lows.

Marriage and divorce rates
Per 1,000 people



Divorce rates have also fallen, but remain relatively high after a sharp increase in the 1960s and '70s.

Divorce rate
Per 1,000
married couples



Sources: National Bureau of Economic Research; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

In Japan, Kristi gave birth to her son Brandon, realized she was lonely and miserable, and left the marriage seven weeks after their first anniversary. Back in the States, Kristi studied to be a travel agent, moved to Michigan and married her second husband at age 23.

He was an electrician. He adopted Brandon, and the couple had a son, Griffin. The marriage lasted 13 years.

"We were really great friends, but we weren't a great husband and wife," Kristi said. "Our parenting styles were too different."

Besides, she went on, "he didn't verbalize a lot, but he was mad a lot, and I was tired of walking around on eggshells."

After the divorce, friends persuaded her to try the online dating service match.com, and just as her free trial week was about to expire, she noticed a new profile in the mix.

"Kristi was one of the first people to ping me," said Mike Burns, an engineer for an e-commerce company. "This was at 3 in the morning."

They started chatting. Mike told Kristi how he'd married his first wife while he was still in college — "definitely too young," he said — and divorced her two years later. He met his second wife through mutual friends, they had a big church wedding, started a software publishing company together, sold it and had two children, Brianna and Alec.

When the marriage started going downhill, Mike ignored signs of trouble, like the comments from neighbors who noticed his wife was never around on weekends.

"I was delusional, I was depressed," he said. "I still had the attitude that divorce wasn't something you did."

After 15 years of marriage, his wife did it for him, and kicked him out of the house. His divorce papers hadn't yet been finalized, he told Kristi that first chat night. "I'll help you get through it," she replied.

Mike and Kristi admit their own three-year-old marriage isn't perfect. The kids are still adjusting to one another. Sometimes Kristi, a homemaker, feels jealous of how much attention her husband showers on his daughter Brianna, 13. Sometimes Mike retreats into his computer. Yet they are determined to stay together.

"I know everyone thinks this marriage is a joke and people expect it to fail," said Kristi. "But that just makes me work harder at it."

"I'd say our chances of success are better than average," her husband added.

In America, family is at once about home and the next great frontier.

THE BABY BOOM FOR GAY PARENTS

A growing number of same-sex couples are pursuing parenthood any way they can.

LOS ANGELES — The Schulte-Wayser family is like the Jetsons: a blend of midcentury traditional and postmodern cool.

One parent is the breadwinner, a corporate lawyer who is Type A when it comes to schoolwork, bedtime and the importance of rules. The other parent is the self-described “baby whisperer,” staying home to care for the couple’s two daughters and four sons, who dash through their days as if wearing jetpacks.

Both parents know when rules and roles are made for subverting. “We are each of us very maternal in our own way,” said Joshua Wayser, 50, the lawyer. “I take my girls shopping, and I’m in charge of beauty and hair care.” Mr. Wayser glanced at Richard Schulte, 61, his homemaker-artist husband, who was sitting nearby.



The Schulte-Wayser family is both modern and traditional at the same time. David Walter Banks for The New York Times

“Of course,” Mr. Wayser added dryly, “he doesn’t think I do a good job.”

Mr. Wayser, Mr. Schulte and their six adopted children are part of one of the more emphatic reinventions of the standard family flow chart. A growing number of gay men and lesbians are pursuing parenthood any way they can: adoption, surrogacy, donor sperm.

"There's a gayby boom, that's for sure," Mr. Wayser said. "So many of our friends are having kids."

Some critics have expressed concern that the children of gay parents may suffer from social stigma and the lack of conventional adult role models, or that same-sex couples are not suited to the monotonous rigors of family life. Earlier studies, often invoked in the culture wars over same-sex marriage, suggested that children who lived with gay parents were prone to lower grades, conduct disorders and a heightened risk of drug and alcohol problems.

But new research suggests that such fears are misplaced. Through a preliminary analysis of census data and other sources, [Michael J. Rosenfeld](#) of Stanford University has [found](#) that whatever problems their children may display are more likely to stem from other factors, like the rupture of the heterosexual marriage that produced the children in the first place.

Once these factors are taken into account, said Dr. Rosenfeld, author of ["The Age of Independence: Interracial Unions, Same-sex Unions, and the Changing American Family,"](#) the children of same-sex parents are academically and emotionally indistinguishable from those of heterosexual parents.

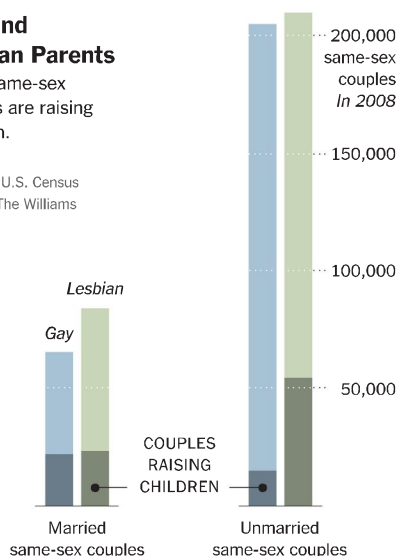
And two-father couples, in defiance of stereotype, turn out to be exemplars of domesticity. In her long-term studies of unconventional families, [Judith Stacey](#), a professor of social and cultural analysis at New York University, found that the most stable of all were those headed by gay men who'd had their children together.

Over 14 years, she said, "I was shocked to find that none of the male couples with children had broken up, not one." Dr. Stacey, author of ["Unhitched: Love, Marriage and Family Values From West Hollywood to Western China,"](#) attributed that success to self-selection. "For men to become parents without women is very difficult," she said. "Only a small percentage are willing and able to make the commitment."

Gay and Lesbian Parents

More same-sex couples are raising children.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; The Williams Institute



There's no maybe about the gayby boom. According to the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, the number of [gay couples with children has doubled](#) in the past decade, and today [well over 100,000 same-sex couples are raising children](#). Other [estimates](#) put the number of children living with gay parents — couples and singletons combined — at close to two million, or one out of 37 children under age 18.

Driving the rise in same-sex parenthood is the resonant success of the marriage equality movement, which has led to the [legalization of same-sex marriage in 16 states](#) and has helped ease adoption policies elsewhere. In 2009, 19 percent of same-sex couples raising children [reported](#) having an adopted child, up from just 10 percent in 2000. Gay parents are four times as likely as straight ones to be raising adoptees, and six times as likely to be caring for foster children, whom they [often end up adopting](#).

Some crave the fetters of DNA, and here women have an advantage. Many of the children of lesbian couples are the biological offspring of one of the women and a semen donor — who may be anonymous, a friend, the brother of the nongestating woman, or [Mark Ruffalo](#).

The Schulte-Wayser family started out unhyphenated, as the Wayser. The two men had broken up; Mr. Wayser was living alone in Los Angeles, his law career was in flux, and he was tired of obsessing about work. "I thought, 'I've got to do something else,'" he said. "I had to come out to myself as a father."

His mother was thrilled, and she offered to pay the costs for a surrogate mother to carry a baby conceived with his sperm. Mr. Wayser said no.

"I wanted the clarity of having someone who didn't share my genetics, who was completely different from me," he said.

He met with an adoption lawyer in March 2000, and by June he had a newborn daughter, Julie. Several months later, Mr. Schulte called to chat, heard Julie in the background and stopped by to meet her.

The baby reminded him of Don King, the boxing promoter. "It was love at first sight," Mr. Schulte said, and Mr. Wayser acknowledged, "I used Julie as bait."

His old boyfriend took it. "We were a couple again," Mr. Schulte said. Or rather, he amended, "we were a family." He and Mr. Wayser later married in Malibu.

From 2002 to 2009, four brothers and a sister followed — Derek, A J, Isaac (all from one mother), Shayna and Joey. "That's my line in the sand," Mr. Wayser said. "We've run out of room."

Yet he believes it's easier to manage a large family than a small one. "They entertain each other. They organize themselves," he said. "We send the kids out. We say, 'Go ride your bike, go out and play.' We want them to have a very traditional childhood in a nontraditional setting."

He admits to being a worrier. Some of the children have learning disabilities and require extensive tutoring, and he doesn't know what risks the birth mothers might have taken during pregnancy.

But he resents people who note the color of his children's skin as well as his obvious financial resources, and cluck about how noble he is and how lucky the children are.

"No, I'm the one who's lucky here," he said. "I'm not trying to save the world."

THE WEDDING WILL HAVE TO WAIT

The idea of marriage can be intimidating, so some couples choose cohabitation instead.

Ana Perez, 35, who moved to New York from the Dominican Republic at age 5, has an open smile, a firm handshake and a vivid, scrappy manner just this side of a fireplug. But as she recalled the night she threw the father of her two older children out of her Harlem apartment, her voice cracked into a dozen pieces and her eyes blurred with tears.

She might have accepted his infidelities if he'd kept them discreet, cheap and away from the neighborhood. "I had this mentality that men will be men," she said.



Despite the instability of family life among the working class and the poor, Julian Hill, 39, and Ana Perez, 34, have stayed together for six years. Beatrice de Gea for The New York Times

But when he began lavishly dating the younger sister of a friend of hers, Ms. Perez confronted him in a fury.

"I said, 'You've been spending money on this person when you have children who need diapers and milk?' " she said. "The last straw was, we had this huge fight in the kitchen and I pulled a knife on him. For a second, I saw my children without a mother — because I would be in jail."

Their relationship ended that night a decade ago, she said, "and I never looked back."

He still visits with George, 16, and Bryana, 10, "as a friend figure," Ms. Perez said, but he has no say in their upbringing.

For the past six years, Ms. Perez has lived with Julian Hill, 39, the father of her third child, Bubba, 4. Mr. Hill is tall and African-American, his head shaved, his cream-colored suit impeccably paired with a blue-checked banker's shirt and yellow tie. He is devoted to all three children and involved in their everyday lives.

"I come home every night," he said. "They might be asleep when I get home, but I'm here every night. I'm always pushing them hard to do their very best, maybe sometimes a little too hard."

Until this fall, Ms. Perez worked for a financial services firm, and she has been the family's primary earner. Mr. Hill, equally ambitious, has worked as a notary public, mortgage closer and occasional stock investor. He and Ms. Perez recently started a small notary-mortgage business.

"I think like Warren Buffett," Mr. Hill said. "My plan is to be a billionaire, but if I fall short and end up a millionaire, that would be fine."

Yet he admits that for now even that downsized goal remains elusive. "If you're talking about income," he said, "we're lower, lower middle class."

If you're talking about their relationship status, he and Ms. Perez have been engaged for more than a year, and they plan to go more than another year before getting married.

Of the many changes to the design, packaging and content of family life over the past generation, researchers cite two as especially significant.

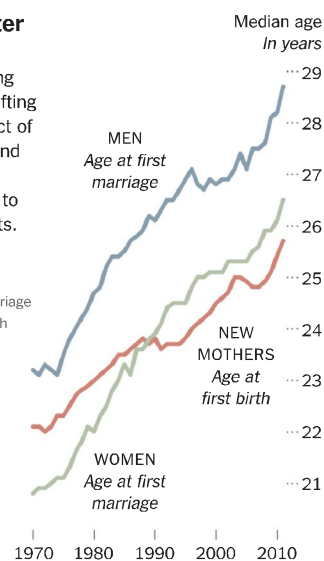
One is the sharp increase in out-of-wedlock births among all but the most highly educated women. The second is the repositioning of marriage from cornerstone to capstone, from a foundational act of early adulthood to a crowning event of later adulthood — an event that follows such previous achievements as finishing college, starting a career and owning furniture not made from fruit crates.

The two trends are interrelated, researchers say, but for reasons that are often misunderstood. Unmarried parents are not necessarily the careless and shortsighted hedonists of stereotype. Instead, a growing number of Americans are simply intimidated by the whole idea of marriage: It has assumed ever greater cultural status, becoming the mark of established winners rather than of modestly optimistic beginners (while weddings have become extravagant pageants where doves and butterflies are released but still, nobody gets the bridesmaid dresses right).

Marrying Later

Both men and women are getting married later, shifting marriage to an act of later adulthood and increasing the number of births to unmarried parents.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; National Marriage Project; Pew Research Center



Childbearing, on the other hand, happens naturally, and offers what marriage all too often does not: lifelong bonds of love.

"For many cohabiting couples, there's a high bar for marriage, high expectations of where they should be at economically or emotionally, and if they don't meet that bar they'll put off getting married," said [Kelly Musick](#), an associate professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell University, who has studied cohabitation patterns.

"But if they're reasonably pleased with the relationship and happen to find themselves pregnant," she continued, "they may realize they're not in a great place financially to become parents but they're still happy to have the child." They find "a sense of purpose and fulfillment in parenthood" even when the rest of life is withholding the goods.

[Kathryn Edin](#), a professor of public policy and management at Harvard University, has interviewed hundreds of low-income Americans. In her latest book, "[Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City](#)," which she wrote with her colleague Timothy J. Nelson, Dr. Edin describes the enormous instability of family life among the working class and the poor.

"In the middle class, the divorce rate has gone down, and family life is in many ways simpler than it used to be," she said in an interview. "There's far more complexity and churning of households among the poor, a turnover of partnerships, lots of half-siblings."

Yet Dr. Edin also punctures the myth of the low-income father as a deadbeat who deposits his sperm and runs. Instead, the young men in her study were eager to establish their paternity.

"They're showing up at the hospital and signing birth certificates in droves," she said. "They're doing all this voluntarily, even though they know that by having their name on the certificate they'll be liable for child support and could go to jail if they don't pay."

The fathers also proved to be more involved in their children's lives than previously believed. "Even five years in, about two-thirds of fathers are seeing their kids at least monthly, and just under half are seeing their kids several times a week," Dr. Edin said.

Most of Ms. Perez's previous co-workers were younger than she was and came from middle-class backgrounds, and she acknowledges that their timing of life events has its benefits.

"You go to college, you build your finances, you marry, you build more finances, then you have children," she said. "If you wait longer, you have the foundation, you're more educated, and you have the confidence in yourself that you're able to survive."

Then again, she laughed, "in Spanish culture, we do everything early."

She is convinced that having her first child at 19 was the right thing to do. Without that incentive, "I would have had such a different life," she said. "I would have been much less productive. I would have spent all my time just hanging out."

But between the spur of her family's needs and a work ethic she describes as "awesome," Ms. Perez rose to a vice presidency at her previous company, "and I didn't even graduate high school," she said.

Nevertheless, she frets incessantly about the future. She'd like to go back to school and set something aside for her children's college educations; she won't buy cereal that's not on sale; and the last thing she wants to spend money on right now is a wedding.

"I'm O.K. just going to City Hall," she said.

Mr. Hill won't hear of it. "I can't do that, I can't just go downtown," he said. "I want to do something big, a wedding with friends and family standing together."

So he'll wait until he's saved enough to pay for the wedding of his dreams, when he can celebrate the family he loves and know it has arrived.

TO ATLANTA, BY WAY OF SRI LANKA

The Indrkrishnans are part of a new tide of immigration with traditionally strong family ties.

ATLANTA — When people first meet Dr. Indran Indrkrishnan, a gastroenterologist with a busy private practice near Atlanta, they take note of his unusual name, his crisply lilting accent, his tan complexion and wavy black hair, and they ask, "So, doctor, where are you from?"

"See if you can guess," Dr. Indrkrishnan replies cheerfully. India? No. Pakistan? No. Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Afghanistan? Negatives all around.



The family of Dr. Indran Indrakrishnan is part of America's fastest-growing immigrant population, Asian-Americans. David Walter Banks for The New York Times

"At that point they're stumped, and they move on to South America," he said, "and when I finally tell them I was born in Sri Lanka, they look more confused than ever. 'Sri Lanka? Where is that?'"

Such casual geographic illiteracy may soon give way under the sheer force of numbers. Dr. Indrakrishnan is part of a new tide of immigration that has been sweeping America, upending old voting blocs, reconfiguring neighborhoods, diversifying local restaurant options and casting a fresh perspective on the meaning of traditional family values.

Though much of the immigration debate has focused on Latinos, the fastest-growing immigrant groups [are not Hispanic but Asian](#). The Asian-American population soared by 46 percent from 2000 to 2010, compared with [43 percent for Hispanics](#) and [1 percent for non-Hispanic whites](#), and the [Asian share of new immigrants nearly doubled](#), to 36 percent from 19 percent.

The 1950s stereotype of the ideal American family, of Dick, Jane and Wonder Bread homogeneity, arose at a time when the immigration rate was near historic lows. Today, the best place to find a traditional, G-rated American family may be in an immigrant community. Asian-American families, in particular, are exceptionally stable. [They are half as likely to be divorced as Americans in general](#): only 16 percent of Asian-American infants are born out of wedlock, compared with 41 percent over

all; and 80 percent of Asian-American children are raised by two married parents, versus 63 percent over all, according to Pew Research data.

Many of the new Asian immigrants come from solidly middle-class backgrounds, and many, though by no means all, do as well or better after moving to the United States. Fifty-one percent hold college degrees, compared with 31 percent of all adults. According to recent studies, Asian-Americans have the highest average household income of any racial group, roughly \$68,000 a year, compared with \$55,000 for whites and \$34,000 for African-Americans.

At the front edge of the Asian-American boom are immigrants from South Asia, including India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Dr. Indrakrishnan, 53, who also teaches at the Emory University School of Medicine, is something of a celebrity among South Asian immigrants — the sociable, civic-minded and highly successful professional everyone wants to schmooze with at the local Hindu temple each week.

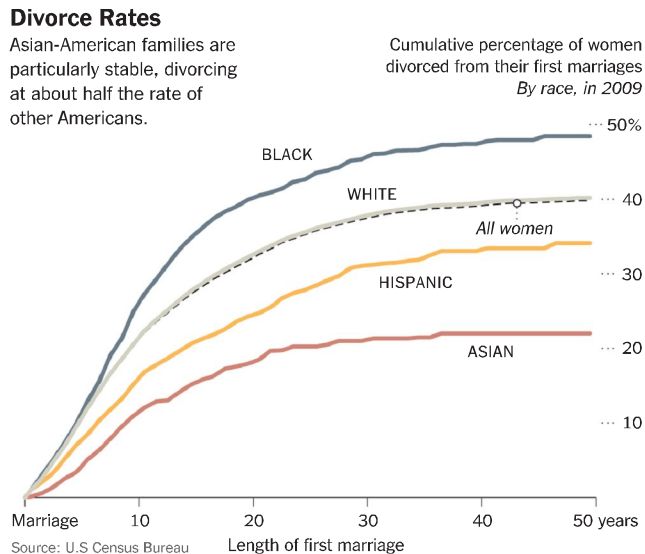
“Sometimes I have to go to temple during off hours,” he said, “or I’ll get caught up chatting there the entire day.”

He lives with his wife, Gayathri, 49, a tax accountant, and their daughter, Harini, a high school senior, in a gated enclave on the banks of a glistening artificial lake, not far from the former residence of the football quarterback Michael Vick. The house feels like a castle, only bigger — 15,000 square feet of vaulted, chandeliered ceilings, an enormous alabaster fireplace, matching ornate staircases that curve together like an upside-down heart, and an elevator if you’re too tired for the stairs.

Personal statements can be found throughout: in one corner, an elegant bronze sculpture of the Hindu deity [Shiva](#); in another, a bulbous-bodied stringed instrument called a Saraswati [vina](#) that Gayathri Indrakrishnan wishes she had more time to play; and in the basement, a custom-built studio where Harini practices Bharatanatyam, a highly structured, almost geometric form of classical Indian dance that has become a defining feature of her otherwise all-American life.

“Dance keeps me connected to my culture,” she said. “I’ve got the best of both worlds.”

Her parents grew up in the same part of Sri Lanka and had friends, a [family doctor](#) and a cleaning woman in common. But the two didn’t really meet until they were young adults living in North America — he finishing his medical training, she pursuing microbiology — and their older brothers decided to play matchmakers.



He flew to Toronto for a rendezvous. If it wasn't exactly love at first sight, she said, "the chemistry was there." The couple spent a year exchanging phone calls and letters and were married in 1991.

"We had what's called a semi-arranged marriage," Dr. Indrakrishnan said. "It's quite common back in India and Sri Lanka." Families are involved, but they don't push; "we had to like each other and get along."

After they married and settled in the United States, Ms. Indrakrishnan traded microbiology for an M.B.A. and a numbers-crunching career. She and her husband became American citizens a decade ago.

"I love living here!" he said. "It is truly the land of opportunities." Yet he said he would not have wanted to marry an American woman, and when asked the first word that came to mind on hearing the word "family," he said, "Gayathri, my wife."

The Census Bureau does not track the frequency of arranged marriages, but researchers believe the numbers are rising. Among other signs, they said, is the growing number of immigrant matchmaking websites like bharatmatrimony.com, aimed not just at eager singletons but at their parents and relatives.

And though many Americans may bridle at the idea, studies suggest there is little downside to letting the family do your advance work. Kathryn Klement, a doctoral candidate in psychology at Northern Illinois University, surveyed 329 married Indian women, 176 of them in arranged marriages, and said, "I didn't find any significant differences" between the two groups in marital happiness, feelings of intimacy, trust and commitment, sexual satisfaction and the ease with which the women could express their desires.

Indran and Gayathri Indrakrishnan independently identified the same key to long-lasting marital harmony. "It's tolerance," she said. Many of Dr. Indrakrishnan's American patients "are not very tolerant of their spouses," he said. "They want the chemistry to be perfect, and if it isn't, pfft, they split up."

Tolerance extends to their parenting style. Their expectations for Harini are quite high, but they care less whether she acs every class than that she is always trying, always seeking to improve.

"If there is homework due or a test the next day and she's goofing off and not listening to me, yes, I'll be upset," her mother said. Harini, it seems, has absorbed the parental credo. When she sensed that Facebook was interfering with her schoolwork, she deactivated her account.

Also poised for deactivation is a certain cliché symbolized by fangs and stripes.

It is no secret that many Asian-American students excel academically; their average SAT scores, for example, are the [highest of any ethnic group](#).

One theory to gain traction lately is that Asian-American parents are harsh taskmasters who virtually chain their children to their desks and pianos, a view reinforced by Amy Chua in her best-selling book ["Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother."](#)

But a long-term study of 300 Chinese-American families suggests that view is nothing but a stereotype. The researchers, led by [Su Yeong Kim](#), an associate professor of human development and family sciences at the University of Texas at Austin, administered lengthy questionnaires to parents and children, asking about school, work, home life, grades, extracurricular activities and emotions. The researchers determined that the parents most likely to raise high-achieving offspring were not cold authoritarians but ones who combined “the right amount of parental control” with a “high level of warmth,” Dr. Kim said.

“Supportive parenting always yields the best outcome academically and socio-emotionally, too,” she added. “These kids outperform the kids of tiger parents by quite a lot.”

She and her colleagues proposed other factors that might help explain the good report cards: family pride; cultural traditions that extol education, like [Confucianism](#); and children’s acute awareness of parental sacrifice.

“They gave up everything for their kids,” as Dr. Kim characterized this attitude, “so I’d better not blow it.” And when they succeed, they bring honor to ancestors, descendants, the entire high-fiving clan.

FOR CAREER JUGGLERS, LIFE GOES BY FAST

With two children, the Glusacs may seem typical, but their story is more complicated.

LOS ANGELES — Jan Glusac, 51, is blond and heigh-ho friendly, a first-grade teacher with a first-rate tolerance for contradictory ideas. A few years ago, she and her family participated in a landmark study by researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles — a close anthropological look at the daily lives of 32 typical middle-class American families.

Does she feel that her family is, in fact, typical?

“I do and I don’t,” Ms. Glusac says.



Numerically, Srdan and Jan Glusac of Los Angeles, with their two children, add up to a typical middle-class family, but their lives tell a richer story. Monica Almeida/The New York Times

She wears a long white skirt, black blouse, jeans jacket and a silver necklace, and is sitting on a plump aubergine couch in a comfortable, recently renovated postwar bungalow in Westchester, a solidly middle-class neighborhood not far from the Los Angeles airport.

On the typical side of the ledger: The average middle-class family has two children, and seated next to Ms. Glusac are her two children, Katie and Chris.

Katie, 17, is a high school senior, a star of her cross-country and soccer teams, an intern at a local veterinary clinic and these days a captive player in that all-American combat sport called applying to college. Chris, 21, is a Santa Monica College engineering student who still lives at home but plans to transfer next year to the University of California, Santa Barbara.

"We may soon be empty nesters," Ms. Glusac says. "That's one phase of life we're not ready for."

But at least they'll still have Ollie, she says — "the best dog ever!" Katie chimes in — and dogs, it so happens, are the most popular pet in America, [preferred over cats](#) by more than two to one.

Around 6 p.m., Srdan Glusac, 50, arrives home from his job as an avionics engineer at Federal Express. Mr. Glusac, who goes by the nickname Serg (pronounced surge), was

born in Sarajevo, Bosnia, but grew up in Montreal. He looks like the original from which Chris was cloned: the same mild face, the same fine, sandy hair.

Mr. Glusac generally gets home an hour or two after his wife, a scheduling disparity common among two-career households: American men spend 35 to 55 minutes [longer on the job](#) each day than women do, while working mothers devote eight more hours a week to child care and housekeeping [compared with working fathers](#).

Less typical is Mr. Glusac's Bosnian mother, Ilinka Volk, who lives nearby and has long acted as the fantasy super-grandma, obviating the need for day care, chauffeuring the kids to soccer games and serving up Old World comfort food like stuffed cabbage, goulash and a revelatory Bosnian custard called snow clouds.

Jan Glusac points out that her family is better off than most, with a household income nearly four times the [national median of about \\$51,000](#). For example, Chris recently bought a black BMW convertible, which meant Katie got his Prius.

"And now we're a four-car family," Chris says sheepishly. "That sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?" The average number of cars per American family is 2.28.

The family has had its share of frame shifts and body blows. Ms. Glusac was treated for [breast cancer](#) eight years ago. In middle school, Chris became extremely introverted and barely left his room. "I feel like I'm a key in the wrong lock," he confessed in a note to his parents.

"That made me start crying," Ms. Glusac says. "I knew exactly what he meant."

As a ninth grader, Katie was arrested after shoplifting more than \$100 worth of clothing from a department store. Her parents were devastated. She was grounded for the summer and had to perform community service, help pay her legal fees by handing over most of the money she'd saved since elementary school, and endure the humiliation of hearing her mother tell other parents that if they didn't want their children associating with Katie, she'd understand.

"That was the hardest part, the strain on my relationship with my parents," Katie says. "But what came out of it was a stronger relationship than before" — and lucky for her, no permanent record.

In the U.C.L.A. study, a team of researchers associated with the [Center on Everyday Lives of Families](#) focused on dual-income families with two or more school-age children at home in the Los Angeles area. The investigators spent weeks with each family, staying in the background as they observed and recorded every aspect of home life: the banter, the spats, the struggles over homework and piano practice, the laundry, the meals.

As recounted in the books ["Fast-Forward Family"](#) and ["Life at Home in the 21st Century,"](#) the scientists learned that American families are just this side of clinically compulsive hoarders, owning "more material goods per household than any society in history," in the words of one investigator, [Jeanne E. Arnold](#), a professor of anthropology.

The researchers also particularized the centrality of the kitchen, where the largest and most visible clocks are displayed and where the greatest number of calendars, school memos and to-do lists are posted.

Yet the lure of a festively pushpinned corkboard has its limits. The researchers determined that even when all of the family members were at home and awake together, they were in the same room only 14 percent of the time.

The researchers have since done comparative studies of families in Italy, Sweden, Samoa and the Peruvian Amazon, and have concluded that American families are outliers in their fixation on children's needs and children's success.

"In other societies, school-aged children are expected to be vigilant and see what needs to be done around the house, and they routinely do chores without being asked," said [Elinor Ochs](#), a director of the study. "But here, in middle-class mainstream households, you can't ask kids to do anything. It's incredible."

Instead, given today's single-digit admission rates at the nation's elite universities, middle-class American parents want their children to focus almost exclusively on homework and extracurricular activities. In a study of the after-school life of students in the Philadelphia area, [Annette Lareau](#) of the University of Pennsylvania and her colleagues found that virtually all the middle-class children remained as tightly scripted outside the classroom as they had been during the school day.

At one suburban school, she said, "I went through the schedules of 100 fourth graders and couldn't find a single child who did not have any organized activities." The researchers also determined that the time children spent in such activities rose in tandem with the mother's education: 4 hours 54 minutes per week for the children of mothers with some college, 5 hours 37 minutes for the offspring of college graduates, and 6 hours 33 minutes for the children of mothers with graduate degrees.

"I remember feeling like that was all I ever did — I was always in the car driving someone someplace," Jan Glusac says of her family's two-car days. "I don't think I could keep that schedule up at this point in my life," she adds. Nowadays, the kids largely take care of themselves, Ms. Glusac says, and they're either out of the house or working in their rooms. "We love being together as a family," she says, even if that means little more than sharing the same roof.

WANTING MARRIAGE AND PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The clues to an American paradox, and family changes, can be found in the past.

The American family began life in the raggedness of the Colonial era as a kind of organizational Swiss Army knife — many institutions in one convenient package.

The home was a place of business, of relentless industry, where there was always more flax to spin and tallow to drip; all able-bodied family members from toddlerhood onward were expected to work for the family economy. (In fact, the word "family" comes from the Latin for servant.)

The home was a delivery ward, schoolroom, hospital and funeral parlor. And in an age before centralized government or even a reliable town sheriff, the home served as the primary locus of social control. Everyone had to reside in the all-encompassing embrace of a bustling household, and adults who tried to live alone, particularly single men, were viewed with suspicion, advised to marry, find room and board with a “decent” family or get out of town.

Your Families: A Photo Essay

With each year that passes, American families are becoming more diverse and family makeups more complex. The Times asked readers to share their favorite family photograph and tell us what makes their family unique or special. Here is a selection of the responses.

[View Slide Show »](#)



As recently as the 1950s, according to [Andrew J. Cherlin](#), a professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University, unattached adults could arouse community ire. “If you didn’t get married by a certain point, there had to be something wrong with you,” he said. “People suspected you were mentally ill.”

Yet as a young nation of wide horizons and Powerball opportunities, America also encouraged a degree of footlooseness, a scorn for the settled and a yen for the new. That novelty-seeking spirit applied as much to conjugal matters as economic ones, and the divorce rate rose steadily along with the number of stars on the flag. By the turn of the 20th century, the United States had the highest divorce rate in the Western world, a title it retains to this day.

It’s the great American paradox. We value marriage as “the center of civilized society,” Dr. Cherlin said. At the same time, we value our liberty, the pursuit of personal happiness and the right to leave a bad marriage behind.

Other factors helped give the American family its distinctive cast. As the population shifted westward and the distances between dwellings opened, Americans grew accustomed to a degree of privacy and personal space that few other earthlings could share.

The passion for privacy accelerated as the Industrial Revolution pulled productive activity out of the house and into the factory, leaving the home as a private sanctum for the family. Americans went wild for the privatized family and family-themed activities: the family vacation, kiddie birthday parties, decorating the Christmas tree,

Science Times
Podcast
Bringing Up the
Modern American
Family

and the ultimate American family holiday, Thanksgiving, signed into law by the man who saved the Union, Abraham Lincoln.

And “over the river and through the woods” notwithstanding, that family mostly meant nuclear, with ties to older or second-order relatives increasingly frayed.

Industrialization and the entry of women into the work force changed the nature of marriage as well, from the pragmatic merging of skill sets that prevailed in the agricultural era to a relationship of choice based on friendship, personal compatibility and love.

“Marriage as an institution lost much of its power over our lives, but marriage as a relationship became more powerful than ever,” said the social historian [Stephanie Coontz](#).

The trend has only intensified with time. “The less we need marriage,” she said, “the more we expect from it.”

BONDING FROM BEHIND BARS

The children of more than a million inmates are left to cope as best they can.

One variant of the modern American family — sadly characteristic, if often ignored — is the family struggling with the impact of an incarcerated parent. Largely as a result of harsh drug laws and mandatory minimum sentences, the [nation's prison population has almost quadrupled](#) over the past 30 years, according to a 2010 Pew Charitable Trusts study.

Today the United States is the world's leading jailer by far, housing more of its citizens behind bars [than the top 35 European countries combined](#). And of the estimated 2.3 million inmates serving time, more than half are parents of children under age 18. That translates into 2.7 million affected children nationwide, or one of every 28, up from one in 125 in 1990.

Some groups have been hit much harder than others. “African-American children living in lower-income, low-education neighborhoods are seven and a half times more likely than white kids to experience the incarceration of a parent,” said [Julie Poehlmann](#), professor of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin. “And by age 14, more than half of these kids with a low-education parent will have an imprisoned parent.”



The daughter of a prison inmate left for school. More than half of the 2.3 million adults incarcerated in the United States are parents of children under 18. Gretchen Ertl for The New York Times

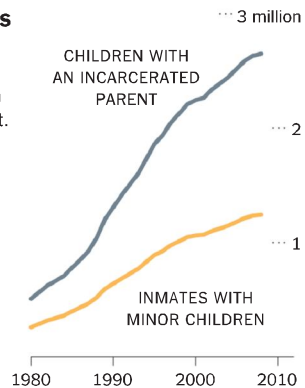
Families are left to cope as best they can, not only with the deafening absence, the economic hardship, the grief and loneliness that separation from a loved one can bring, but also with the stigma that accompanies a criminal conviction, the feelings of humiliation, debasement and failure.

It's one thing if your father is taken away by disease or divorce; it's another if he's taken away in handcuffs. Studies have shown that even accounting for factors like poverty, the children of incarcerated parents are at heightened risk of serious behavioral problems, of doing poorly in school or dropping out, of substance misuse, of getting in trouble with the law and starting the cycle anew.

Inmate Parents

An estimated 2.7 million children nationwide have an incarcerated parent.

Source: Pew Charitable Trusts



In a telling sign, [“Sesame Street” recently introduced](#) a Muppet named Alex, who looks as glum as Eeyore and is ashamed to admit why only his mother shows up at school events: Dad is in prison. The show offers an online tool kit for children and their caregivers, [“Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration.”](#) with a coloring book, cutout mobile and “how am I feeling?” cards (angry, upset, sad).

“We know a lot of kids who need help understanding what is happening with their parents, and caregivers who need to know how to talk about it,” said Dr. Poehlmann, who helped develop the tool kit.

Nearly half the caregivers never talk about the imprisoned parent, while another third simply lie, Dr. Poehlmann said. “They don’t have the words, they don’t know what the kids will understand,” she said. “But kids have big ears, and if no one talks about it directly, the kids will feel they should keep it secret.”

Caregivers are also often hesitant to take children to visit incarcerated parents, either out of fear the visit will be traumatic, or because the prison is usually in a remote rural area hours from public transportation.

Whatever the reason, a vast majority of prisoners get no visits, from their children or anybody else, Dr. Poehlmann said, “and they feel very sad about that.”

During several recent visits to a men’s low-security federal prison in rural New Jersey, the joy, pain and unsettling ordinariness of family time, penitentiary style, were on fluorescent-lit display.

Women brought babies, children, teenagers and bags of quarters for the vending machines. Fathers wearing prison khakis and work boots were required to stay seated in their molded plastic chairs, but as family members filed in, the men’s Humpty Dumpty grins threatened to split their faces.

Older children settled into seats beside their fathers, while younger ones played at kiddie tables in the corner. Everybody ate chips, microwaved sandwiches, bags of M&Ms. The prison photographer snapped family portraits in front of fake backdrops of palm trees and sunsets.

One day at the end of visiting hours, as family members lined up to await escorted passage through multiple locked doors, a 10-year-old boy in a striped polo shirt stood next to his mother, crying and crying. She pulled him close, but the boy didn't stop. He was weeping his quiet ocean of loss and would give no thought to the shore.

In interviews, conducted in person and through an intermediary, the prisoners, too, teared up when they talked about their children, and the great difficulty they had maintaining bonds through sentences long enough to turn those children into adults.

All are nonviolent offenders, as are about two-thirds of prisoners over all. They spoke on condition that only their first names be used.

Sing, a tall, slim man in his early 40s, has been in prison for 15 years on drug charges, with two years to go. His son and daughter are now 17 and 23, but he has been "adamant" about staying involved in their lives — through letters, phone calls and emails.

"They are doing very well," he said. "They have no criminal problems."

Yet because they live in Florida, 1,000 miles away, Sing hasn't seen them in five years. He and other inmates expressed frustration at how often the [Bureau of Prisons](#) flouted its official policy of trying to house inmates in facilities within 500 miles of their families. The authorities are supposed to do as much as possible to keep families together, Sing said bitterly, "but they do more to keep families apart."

Other inmates said that no matter where it was, prison had a way of corroding emotional ties to the outside world. Jon, who is 55 and three years into a five-year sentence, scoffed when he first arrived and a seasoned inmate told him he'd soon stop caring about the everyday concerns of the people he left behind, including those of his only child, a teenage girl.

The veteran, Jon sighed, was right. "I have to make a special effort now to stay emotionally connected with my daughter and to keep up with her daily experiences," he said. "It's hard for me to do. She'll start talking about her friends and I'll have no idea who they are."

Perseverance helps. "My top priority is to stay relevant in my kids' lives," said Rob, an athletic 46-year-old who has been in prison four years and has three teenage daughters. "I put them first as much as I can."

He calls each girl once a week and prepares conversation notes ahead of time. He sends gifts he's drawn or crocheted. They have a family book club. His daughters seem to be doing well: One is at Bryn Mawr College, and another is at Tabor Academy, a highly competitive prep school. But with nine years of hard time yet to go, who knows if all the threads will hold?

SIMPLY DECIDING TO BE RELATED

Circumstances can lead to friendships becoming something more.

The night Beki Reese's 22-year-old son, Caleb, went into a [coma](#), three months before he would die of lung [cancer](#), she asked his best friend, "Matt, are we going to lose you too, when this is all over?"

After meeting at a heavy metal concert in 2001, Matthew Tanksley, now 33, became the big brother Caleb never had. When Caleb got sick, Matt visited him in the hospital almost daily, and briefly took on the role of nurse during a memorable trip to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. But he was also there for Ms. Reese, of Costa Mesa, Calif., who says she depended on him for emotional support as her son's illness progressed.

"Through that ordeal, that nine-month period, I became like a full-fledged member of the family," Mr. Tanksley said. "We were having family dinners together, we were going out to eat, we were talking to each other every day on the phone. Hard times build bonds, and that definitely happened."

Mr. Tanksley's own mother had died when he was 13, so he welcomed the Reese clan's embrace. Seven years later, he and Caleb's mother remain close: She calls him her son, and he introduces her as "Mom."



Relationships like these — independent of biology but closer and more enduring than friendship — have been documented in various cultures throughout history. In the United States, they are particularly common within [African-American](#) and [immigrant](#) communities, as well as gay and lesbian social networks. Anthropologists have traditionally used the term "fictive kin" to separate such relationships from "true" kinship based on blood or law, but many researchers have recently pushed back against that distinction, arguing that self-constructed families are no less real or meaningful than conventional ones.

WELL

The American Family:
Reader Comments

"They see these folks as family, and so I'm going to honor that," said Dawn O. Braithwaite, head of communication studies at the University of Nebraska. "We want to think about it more as a continuum from friendship to family, and I don't know when the bell rings. But definitely, for these people, nobody had a doubt that it was a family to them."

Dr. Braithwaite and her colleagues have termed such families "voluntary kin." For a [study](#) published in 2010, they interviewed 110 people in such relationships; they found that for some people, voluntary kinship filled a void left by death or estrangement from biological family, while for others the relationships were supplemental or temporary.

One thing that distinguishes these relationships from friendship, Dr. Braithwaite said, is that they often become central to one's identity. And many serve important life functions: They may provide a sense of belonging, as well as financial and emotional relief.

Mr. Tanksley's own family expanded three years ago, when he married Caleb Reese's former girlfriend, Shannon. Their two children call Ms. Reese "Nana." — **Roni Jacobson**

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