

IN THE ABSENCE OF FAMILY: Lives Shaped by Loss

The Changing American Family

Thank you for showing an interest in a very significant but under-recognized subject that is rarely addressed in the literature: the number of Americans who are facing the future alone without family, and how a legacy of loss shapes lives in enumerable ways.

Rather than take up presentation time, I offer some data cited below, that I feel is essential for your understanding of the dynamic changes that have occurred in the American family—the developments that provide the context in which to discuss family loss and the prospect of facing the future alone.

With shifting demographics, we can expect that many of our clients will experience the loss of kinship ties, with corresponding consequences that will significantly impact their lives.

Few of us live in families remotely resembling the families in which we were reared, or those of our parents' or grandparents' generation. New modalities of family life prevail and adaptation to the changing family systems calls for new coping strategies. No longer do we live with extended families; patterns of family life are more transient, especially in the last twenty-five years.

Statistics on family living reflect enormous change and show the dramatic alteration of what we know as family. It is essential that we consider how these changes will impact our clients, understanding the possibilities that individuals may experience the loss and lessening of family.

- Increase in single child homes
- Increase in childlessness
- Increase in the number of women giving birth to their first child after age forty
- Increase in divorce rates among middle-aged and older adults—“Gray Divorce”
- Increase in the number of individuals living alone
- Increase in the number of older adults living alone—“Elder Orphans”
- Decrease in number of individuals who are married
- Decrease in family size
- Decrease in the number of individuals in each household

Perhaps the most startling findings I found were that (1) single child families are the fastest growing family dynamic in the United States and that (2) the greatest shift in household type that occurs after the age of 50 is the steady increase in individuals living alone—the proportion of

one-person households increased by 10 percentage points between 1970 and 2012, from 17 percent to 27 percent—an increase more than any other type.

If one considers what is called the “4-2-1” pattern, where a single child will be responsible for, and have to support two parents and four grandparents, a new phenomena of family life emerges and has significant importance and ramifications in the discussion of loss of family.

Concurrently, the dramatic increase in those living alone, perhaps even with family ties, as well as those identified at “elder orphans”, present another dynamic in assessing family change.

Here are some of the statistics that I found revealing and supportive of the premise that more and more individuals will experience the loss of kinship ties, and face a future alone:

Single-child households are on the rise:

- *Only child families are the fastest growing family form in this country* and open a new chapter in the history of the greatest shift in population demographics in the United States. (“Do Only Children Have More Problems Making Friends”, Irene S. Levine, *Psychology Today*, June 7, 2011)
- The percentage of couples who have one child has doubled in the past 20 years, up from 10 percent to *over 23 percent*, based on 2011 Census Bureau figures. Today there are 20 million only-child households in the United States. (“Still Lonely in a World With More ‘Onlies””, B. Salamon, *The New York Times*, February 17, 2013)
- Nearly 47 percent of households with children are one-child families.. The Pew Research Center reports that the average size of an American family has been shrinking, from 3.7 children in 1960 to 1.9 today. (September 24, 2015)
- According to “Only Child News” and the U.S. Census Bureau, a third of American families started today will have only one child. Three-member families increased from 10 million in 1972 to more than 15 million today, and *one-child families outnumber those with two children*. (*Time Magazine*, “Your Family”, June 7, 1999)
- In New York City, over 30 percent of children are only children. (*Only Child Magazine*, March, 2009)

Childlessness is increasing

- More women in the U.S. are childless than at any other time since the government began keeping track a new survey found. (*TIME Health*, Victor Luckerson, April 7, 2015)

- While married couples with children were the majority decades ago, now nearly *57 percent of U.S. households are childless*. In 2012, about 29 percent included childless married couples and nearly 28 percent included people living alone. (“U.S. Families Shift as Fewer Households Include Children: Census”, S. Heavy, Reuters, August 27, 2013)
- Nearly half of women (47.6 percent) between the ages of 15 and 44 did not have children in 2014, according to new data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey; this represents *the highest percentage of childless women since 1976*.
- According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the general fertility rate in the United States—the average number of babies that women from 15 to 44 bear over their lifetime—dropped to a record low last year, to 1.86 babies. (*The New York Times*, Tamar Levin, December 4, 2014)

Birth rates for older women are increasing:

- The birth rate for women in their 40's has more than doubled since 1981, and has climbed more than 70 percent since 1990.
- For women aged 45 to 49, the birth rate is nearly four times the number in 1990. (National Vital Statistics Reports: Volume 57, Number 7, January 7, 2009)
- The percent of mothers at the end of their childbearing years who have one child has more than doubled—from 11 percent to 22 percent. (Pew Research Center, “Family Size Among Mothers”, G. Livingston, May 7, 2015)
- The overall U.S. birth rate declined to a record low in 2011, but newly released government data showed remarkably different trends for young and older women. Birth rates continued to decline to an all-time low among women in their teens and early 20s, while *rising to the highest level in four decades among women in their early 40s*. (Pew Research Center, G. Livingston and D. Cohn, July 3, 2013)

Divorce rates increasing among middle-aged and older adults:

- At a time when divorce is becoming less common for younger adults, so-called “gray divorce” is on the rise: *Among U.S. adults ages 50 and older, the divorce rate has roughly doubled since the 1990s*. (“Led by Baby Boomers, divorce rates climb for America's 50+ population”, R. Stepler, Pew Research, March 9, 2017)
- There have been striking changes in the age pattern of divorce over the past three decades. Divorce at age 40 or older is much more common than it was. (“Breaking Up is Hard to Count: The Rise of Divorce in the United States, 1980-2010”, S. Kennedy and S. Ruggles, *Demography*)

- *Roughly 1 in 4 divorces in 2010 occurred to persons aged 50 and older.* (“The Gray Divorce Revolution: Rising Divorce Among Middle-Aged and Older Adults, 1990-2010”, Susan L. Brown, *Journals of Gerontology, B Series*, November, 2012)
- Late-life divorce (also called “silver” or “gray” divorce) is increasing. In 2014, people age 50 and above were twice as likely to go through a divorce than in 1990. *For those over 65, the increase was even higher*, according to the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. (“After Full Lives Together, More Older Couples are Divorcing”, Abby Ellin, *The New York Times*, October 30, 2015.)

The number of people in *individual* households has increased

- The number of single-person households in the United States changed dramatically from 1960 to 2018. *Approximately 35.74 million people in 2018 were living in single-person households compared to approximately 5.5 million people in 1960.* (“Number of single-person households in the U.S. from 1960 to 2018, E. Duffin, May 15, 2019, [statista.com](https://www.statista.com))
- The proportion of one-person households increased by 10 percentage points between 1970 and 2012, from 17 percent to 27 percent—an increase more than any other type. (“America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012”, J. Vespa, J. Lewis and R. Kreider, August 2013, [census.gov](https://www.census.gov).)
- *This means that in 2012, one-person households comprised 1 out of every 4 households or 27 percent of the population lived alone.*

The number of older adults living alone has increased

- *The greatest shift in household types that occurs after the age of 50 is the steady increase in individuals living alone.* By age 80, three out of five households consist of a single person (“Demographics of an Aging America”, Harvard Joint Center for Housing, 2014)
- The number of Boomers who are aging alone is growing. Experts on geriatrics call them “*elder orphans*”—baby boomers without adult children, spouse, relatives or other support groups to rely on for assistance, company and help during senior years. (“Living Without Family: 5 stages of Self Care Seniors Should Know”, [seniorliving.org](https://www.seniorliving.org))
- Twenty-two percent of Americans 65 years and above are lacking family or support that would take care of them. In the updated 2015 U.S. census, the percentage of older people living alone increased to 42.8 percent. (“Aging Baby Boomers, Childless and Unmarried, at Risk of Becoming ‘Elder Orphans’”, Maria Carney, M.D., *Eureka Alert* publication, May 15, 2015)
- More than one-fourth—27 percent— of women ages 65 to 74 lived alone in 2014, and this share jumps to 42 percent among women ages 75 to 84, and to 56 percent among women

ages 85 and older. (“Fact Sheet: Aging in the United States”, M. Mather, Population Reference Bureau, January, 2016)

Marriage rates are declining

- After decades of declining marriage rates and changes in family structure, *the share of American adults who have never been married is at an historic high.* (W. Wang and K. Parker, “Record Share of Americans Have Never Married”, Pew Research Center, September 24, 2014)
- For the first time since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking these numbers in 1976, there are more single Americans than people who are married.
- The U.S. marriage rate reflects a dramatic decrease since 1970 when there were 76.5 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women compared to 32.2 marriages per 1,000 unmarried women in 2017. (Marriage Rate in the U.S.: Geographic Variation, 2017, V. Schweizer, National Center for Family and Marriage Research)
- Marriage rates have declined steadily since the 1980s. Today they are lower than any other time since 1870. (*The Washington Post*, Ana Swanson, June 23, 2015)
- The total number of people getting married has fallen steadily. Now only about two million marriages happen a year, a drop of almost half a million from their peak. As a result, barely more than half of adults in the U.S. say they’re living with a spouse. This is the lowest share on record, and down from 70 percent in 1967. (“Marriage May Be Obsolete”, J. Zagorsky, *Salon*, June 3, 2016)
- *Never before in U.S. history have so many adults been unmarried.* There are now 109 million Americans, 18 and older, who are divorced, widowed or have always been single. *That’s 45 percent of the adult population.* (“What has Changed for Single America in the Past Decade”, B. DePaulo, *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2016)

Family size is shrinking

- Shrinking of the family is reflected in the decline of number of children in U.S. families. In 1976, 40 percent of families had four or more children, compared to 2016 when 41 percent of families had two children. (Shrinking family size driven in part by decline in moms have 4+ children”, Pew Research Center, August 9, 2018)
- Data from the National Center for Health Statistics shows the *overall birth rate in 2011 as the lowest since at least 1920, the earliest year for which there are reliable numbers.* (Pew Research Center, G. Livingston and D. Cohn, November 29, 2012)

- The average number of people per family decreased from 3.67 in 1960 to 3.14 in 2018, (“Average number of people per family in the United States from 1960 to 2018”, Statista, 2019)
- According to U.S. Census survey figures, families with three or more children decreased from 10.1 million in 1972 to 7.9 million by 2000. Sixty-six percent of households in 2012 were family households, down from 81 percent in 1970.

Number of individuals in each household is declining

- Since 1970, the portion of U.S. households that include families with two married parents and children fell by half, from 40 percent to 20 percent last year, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Sixty-six percent of households in 2012 were family households, down from 81 percent in 1970. Between 1970 and 2012, the share of households that were married couples with children under 18 halved from 40 percent to 20 percent. (“America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012”, J. Vespa, J.M. Lewis and R. Kreider, August 2013, census.gov)
- The proportion of one-person households increased by 10 percentage points between 1970 and 2012, from 17 percent to 27 percent. (“America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012”, J. Vespa, J.M. Lewis and R. Kreider, August 2013, census.gov)
- Between 1970 and 2012, the average number of people per household declined from 3.1 to 2.6. (“America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012”, J. Vespa, J.M. Lewis and R. Kreider, August 2013, census.gov)
- Society will see the effects of smaller families; while the number of people living alone in America rose in the last sixty years, the average household size also declined.

These findings and statistics reflect how the American family has changed dramatically over the past half century. When both the number of children and the number of adults in a household has fallen, there are many millions living with a smaller nuclear family or living alone.

With a greater number of individuals opting for marrying later in life, or not at all, has resulted in delayed child bearing or, choosing to have only one child or none.

This means more and more individuals will be orphaned at an earlier age, and without siblings or a continuous kinship network throughout their childhood.

As quoted in *The Economist*, this “new century will be one where kinship becomes a weaker force...so more people will be reaching the end of their lives with no immediate relatives at all.” (“The Economist”, December 23, 2000)

While the actual number of people who are without family is unknown, statistics suggest significant trends that reflect this reality, and to dramatic increases in the future.

How individuals will cope as they face the complexity of no kinship support is of particular concern for therapists, as the absence of family will increasingly affect our clients.

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