

The Future of Families in America

Olga Romero Zelaya

Department of Criminology and Sociology, University of North Carolina Wilmington

SOC 345: Sociology of the Family

Dr. Engelman

October 24, 2025

The “nuclear family” has long been portrayed in movies and media as the traditional household structure: a heterosexual couple raising their children. Men were the “breadwinners,” while women took on domestic and caregiving responsibilities. These gender roles began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s as expectations slowly evolved. Since then, a variety of social, political, and cultural forces have shaped family dynamics. Today, there is growing concern about what the future holds for families given society’s new technological advancements and rapidly changing policies. For this reason, it is imperative more than ever to examine how families are evolving in real time and what outcomes we should be preparing for in the years ahead.

For much of U.S. history, couples were expected to marry before moving in together or having children. Today, marriage is no longer the baseline for building a life with a partner. In fact, in 2024, U.S. adults were less likely to be married than at almost any point since the Census Bureau began tracking marriage trends in 1940. Since 2020, fewer than half of American households have included a married couple (USAFacts, 2025). Additionally, 78% of adults ages 18–29 said it is acceptable for an unmarried couple to live together, even if they do not plan to marry (Pew Research Center, 2019). While this data shows a decline in marriage rates, it does not mean that people no longer pursue relationships or believe in love. Instead, it reflects a shift in how couples are choosing to build their partnerships.

An increasing number of couples are choosing cohabitation, where they live together despite not being married. Some view it as a “testing phase” to see whether they can successfully build a life together as husband and wife, while others choose cohabitation for financial reasons. One of the biggest conflicts with marriage is the cost of weddings. According to Chertoff and Darling (2025), the average wedding in 2025 is approximately \$36,000, with modest celebrations

for a long list of services—photographers, videographers, entertainment, beauty professionals, and more. In contrast, cohabitation can relieve financial pressure by allowing partners to share rent, utilities, and other living expenses (Center for Relationship and Sexual Wellness, 2024). Additionally, some couples simply view marriage as a legal formality and see no reason to spend thousands of dollars just to be bound to someone on paper.

Social media has significantly changed family dynamics because of how accessible it has become. Seeking advice from strangers has become the new norm. Information about sexual health can be accessed within seconds, helping people make more informed decisions and prevent unplanned pregnancies. Parents sending their children off to college are joining Facebook groups to share information, discuss campus issues, and seek advice on supporting their children. There are countless podcasts, YouTube videos, and articles that share stories from women navigating parenting challenges, even from people with the same cultural background and values. Women are reading about postpartum depression and finding advice on how to handle these challenges without letting it affect their relationships. While all of this inclusive content can be enriching for many, strangers now have the power to quickly influence decisions about relationships, parenting, and even marriage.

The dating realm has also completely transformed with the use of media as a whole. According to Curry (2025), over 350 million people use dating apps worldwide in 2025. Nowadays, a connection can begin from something as simple as replying to an Instagram story, allowing people from different countries to interact who otherwise would have never crossed paths. However, the evolution of technology has also changed intimacy in unsettling ways. Artificial intelligence has reshaped human connections through apps that allow people to

pop star Taylor Swift spread to millions before being removed (Berger, 2024). Many public figures have already had to deal with these violations, but it can also target ordinary individuals you encounter in everyday life. Technology now has the power to simulate emotional, visual, and sexual connections, and it raises alarming concerns. If people can satisfy their desires through screens, could that be contributing to declining birth rates? Many may no longer feel the need to go out and “explore the market” when they can customize their experiences from the comfort of their own homes and devices.

For generations, boys have been told to be strong, hide their emotions, and avoid vulnerability. As a result, they often grow up not knowing how to process or express their feelings and cannot show up in the way they are needed. Fortunately, there has been a shift in this narrative. The mental health landscape has become increasingly inclusive, with therapists who specialize in specific identities, including different ethnicities, religions, genders, and LGBTQ+ communities. Social media has given adolescents access to stories from strangers who share their experiences of being silenced emotionally, reaffirming that it is okay to seek help from mentors or counselors. The internet has also made it easier than ever to find a therapist in seconds, and as parents share skills and strategies online, ideas about masculinity are changing rapidly.

These generations are actively unlearning the toxic masculinity that equates emotional suppression with strength. Many men were never given the cultural permission or supportive platforms needed to challenge these expectations and develop into emotionally present partners and fathers. Men and boys are being welcomed into emotional spaces that were previously unavailable to them. As a result, I believe we will see men take on more household and

both partners contributing equally, although their definitions of equality may differ. However, I am curious about what new forms of parenting will emerge as men become more emotionally in tune with themselves.

Women are also being encouraged to take action in their own lives. Professionally, they are told to pursue higher education and become, as some social media users say, “disgustingly educated.” In my search, I found hundreds of TikTok videos with captions like, “*The feminine urge to be disgustingly over-educated*” (Pamela, 2025). One comment read, “*This over marriage and kids any day,*” with hundreds of likes agreeing. On a personal level, women are urging other women online to reconsider motherhood, with some even posting why they regret having children to educate others. For example, TikTok creator **@kelleydaring**, who has over 217,000 followers and more than 6.1 million likes, shares hundreds of stories from women and men who regret having children and use her platform to encourage others to think carefully before starting a family. Content about birth experiences and postpartum realities is also reaching massive audiences, reshaping perceptions of the intense physical and emotional strain that parenting can involve.

Finally, today’s political landscape is one of the most influential factors shaping decisions about whether to start a family—and for those who already have children, it raises urgent questions about how new Trump Administration policies will affect their stability and well-being. One recent example is the administration’s decision to fire dozens of staff members responsible for overseeing roughly \$15 billion in special education funding, whose work ensured that states provided services to 7.5 million children with disabilities (Turner, 2025). This

opportunities.

Earlier this year, the "One Big Beautiful Bill" introduced new federal student loan limits that will take effect on July 1, 2026. Graduate students will now have an annual borrowing limit of \$20,500 and a lifetime limit of \$100,000. Medical and law students will have an annual limit of \$50,000 and a lifetime limit of \$250,000 (Curry, 2025). These restrictions have sparked widespread backlash, as they will affect millions of people's access to higher education, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Many fear that the insufficient borrowing capacity will hinder their ability to pursue the education they hoped would help them break their families' cycle of poverty. This situation may also influence their decision to start a family, as they might feel discouraged from having children due to their limited income and lack of education.

Negron (2025) released a report in September 2023, sharing statistics about American households and the impact of the current administration. The report indicates a \$2,400 decrease in short-run average income per household, an increase of \$400 in the cost of financing a new car, and a 13% average revenue loss for typical small businesses. These pressures are creating growing tension within families and relationships. While support services exist for couples experiencing stress, many cannot afford the cost or the time required to seek help, contributing to a cycle of ongoing strain. If these patterns continue, relationship dissatisfaction and divorce rates may rise, affecting future generations who grow up in high-stress households. In the past, staying together was often seen as the selfless choice for the children, but with today's housing and economic market, having two households is no longer as feasible as it once was—even for dual-earner couples.

household responsibilities, and that frustration is progress in itself. Future generations of mothers have made it clear, both online and in person, that they will not accept a dynamic where men only earn the income while women handle most of the other duties. However, the political climate in the United States takes far more precedence right now than conversations about future family and partner dynamics. I find it incredibly difficult to predict what society will look like in a decade, but seeing people respond to new policies gives me hope, along with millions of others. People are actively fighting for what they believe in, and the “No Kings” protest on October 18, 2025, is evidence of that. Family dynamics are tied to many broader issues that are constantly evolving, and we are in completely uncharted territory. I do not know what households will look like years from now, but I do believe that the running joke about still living with your parents at the age of twenty-five will no longer be seen as an insult. Instead, it will become normalized as a result of today’s economic pressures and political decisions in America.

Berger, V. E. (2024, October 22). *AI is changing the future of human intimacy. Here's what to know*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/virginieberger/2024/10/22/ai-is-changing-the-future-of-human-intimacy-heres-what-to-know/>

Center for Relationship and Sexual Wellness. (2024, October 21). *The research on cohabitation before marriage: Pros, cons and considerations*.

<https://relationshipandsexualwellness.com/blog/the-research-on-cohabitation-before-marriage-pros-cons-and-considerations-1#:~:text=Conclusion:%20Is%20Cohabitation%20Before%20Marriage,are%20right%20for%20their%20relationship.>

Curry, D. (2025, August 26). *Global dating app revenues exceeded \$6 B, North America drove 50 percent of the total*. Business of Apps. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/dating-app-market/>

Curry, D. (2025, August 7). *Trump's 'Big Beautiful Bill' sets student-loan caps for medical school at \$200,000*. CNBC. <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/08/07/trumps-big-beautiful-bill-sets-student-loan-caps-for-medical-school.html>

Chertoff, J., & Darling, G. (2025, October 23). *What's the average cost of a wedding?* Zola. <https://www.zola.com/expert-advice/whats-the-average-cost-of-a-wedding>

Kelley Daring [@kelleydaring]. *TikTok profile*. TikTok. Retrieved October 2025, from <https://www.tiktok.com/@kelleydaring>

for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/8-ways-trumps-turbulence-tax-is-costing-the-economy/>

Pamela W. [@ohitspamelaw]. (2025, April 7). *I'm clearly just a girl...* [Video]. TikTok. <https://www.tiktok.com/@ohitspamelaw/video/7490702187434167583?q=women%20disgustingly%20educated&t=1761346804965>

Pew Research Center. (2019, November 6). *Marriage and cohabitation in the U.S.* <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>

Turner, C. (2025, October 13). *Amid shutdown, Trump administration guts department overseeing special education.* NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2025/10/13/nx-s1-5572489/trump-special-education-department-funding-layoffs-disabilities>

USAFacts. (2025, February 11). *State of relationships: Marriage and living alone in the U.S.* <https://usafacts.org/articles/state-relationships-marriages-and-living-alone-us/>