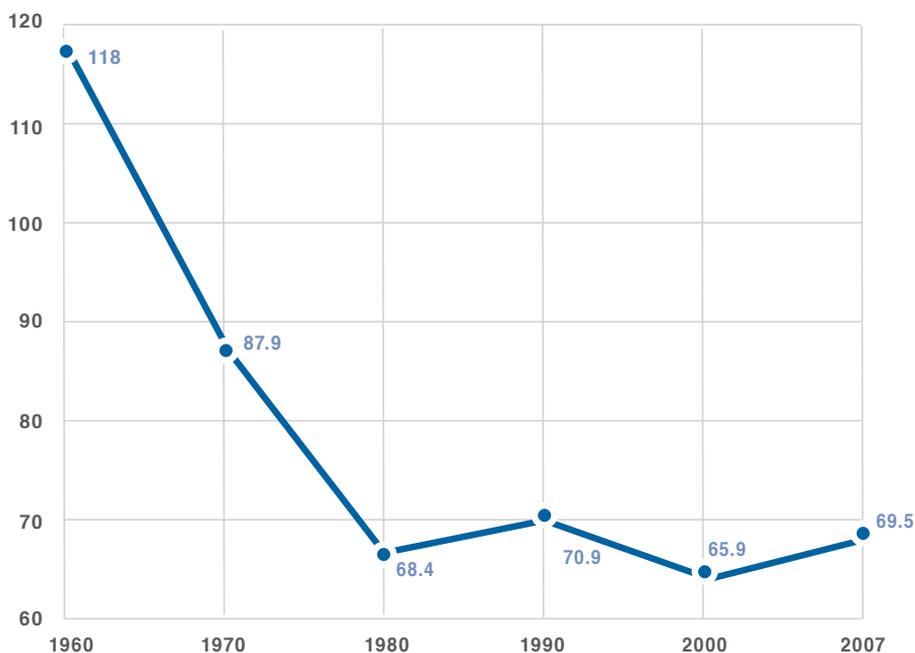


## LOSS OF CHILD CENTEREDNESS

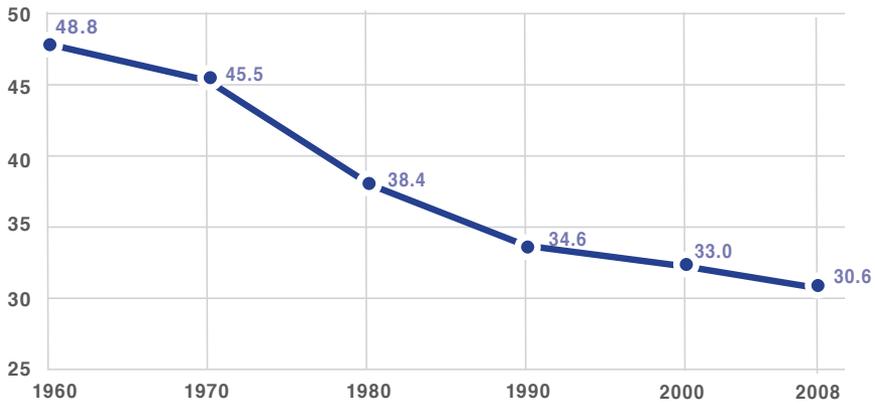
**FIGURE 8. FERTILITY RATES, 1960-2007, NUMBER OF BIRTHS PER 1,000 WOMEN AGE 15 THROUGH 44, UNITED STATES**



A The number of births that an average woman would have if, at each year of age, she experienced the birth rates occurring in the specified year. A total fertility rate of 2.110 represents “replacement level” fertility under current mortality conditions (assuming no net migration).

**SOURCE:** National Vital Statistics Report, 1993, Pages 1, 2, 10 and 11; National Vital Statistics Report, 2001, 49:1; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999, Pages 75, 76 and 78, Tables 91, 93 and 96. Martin, J., et al. Births: Preliminary Data for 200, National Vital Statistics Report, 57:12, Mar 18, 2009, p. 6, Table 1.

**FIGURE 9. PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH A CHILD OR CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18, 1960-2008, UNITED STATES**



**SOURCE:** Calculated from data in U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1964, Tables 36 and 54; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1980, Tables 62 and 67; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1985, Tables 54 and 63; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1994, Table 67; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2004-05, Table 56; and America's Families and Households, 2008, Tables F1 and H1 ([www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008.html)).

**KEY FINDING: The presence of children in America has declined significantly since 1960, as measured by fertility rates and the percentage of households with children. Other indicators suggest that this decline has reduced the child centeredness of our nation and contributed to the weakening of the institution of marriage.**

Throughout history, marriage has first and foremost been an institution for procreation and raising children. It has provided the cultural tie that seeks to connect the father to his children by binding him to the mother of his children. Yet in recent times, children increasingly have been pushed from center stage.

Americans on average have been having fewer children. Figure 8 indicates the decline in fertility since 1960. It is important to note that fertility had been gradually declining throughout American history, reaching a low point in the Great Depression of the 1930s before suddenly accelerating with the baby-boom generation starting in 1945. By 1960 the birth rate was back to where it had been in 1920, with the average woman having about three and one half children over the course of her life. After 1960 the birth rate went down sharply for two decades, before leveling off around 1980.

In 2007, the latest year for which we have complete information, the American “total fertility rate” (TFR) stood at 2.122, below the 1990 level and slightly above two children per woman. This rate is right at the “replacement level” of 2.1, the level at which the population would be replaced through births alone, and is one of the highest rates found in modern, industrialized societies. In most European and several Asian nations the total fertility rate has

decreased to a level well below that of the United States, in some countries to only slightly more than one child per woman.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. fertility rate is relatively high due in part to the contribution of our higher-fertility Hispanic population.

The long-term decline of births has had a marked effect on the household makeup of the American population. It is estimated that in the middle of the 1800s more than 75 percent of all households contained children under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> One hundred years later, in 1960, this number had dropped to slightly less than half of all households. In 2000, just four decades later, less than 33 percent of households included children (Figure 9). This obviously means that adults are less likely to be living with children, that neighborhoods are less likely to contain children, and that children are less likely to be a consideration in daily life. It suggests that the needs and concerns of children—especially young children—gradually may be receding from our national consciousness.

Several scholars determined that in 1960 the proportion of one's life spent living with a spouse and children was 62 percent, the highest in our history. By that year the death rate had plummeted so that fewer marriages ended through death, and the divorce revolution of recent decades had not yet begun, so that a relatively small number of marriages ended in divorce. By 1985, however, just 25 years later, the proportion of one's life spent with spouse and children dropped to 43 percent—which was the lowest in our history.<sup>3</sup> This remarkable reversal was caused mainly by the decline of fertility and the weakening of marriage through divorce and unwed births.

In a cross-national comparison of industrialized nations, the United States ranked virtually at the top in the percentage disagreeing with this statement: “the main purpose of marriage is having children.”<sup>4</sup> Nearly 70 percent of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is something else compared, for example, to just 51 percent of Norwegians and 45 percent of Italians. Consistent with this view is a dramatic change in our attitudes about holding marriages together for children. In a Detroit area sample of women, the proportion of women answering “no” to the question “Should a couple stay together for the sake of the children?” jumped from 51 percent to 82 percent between 1962 and 1985.<sup>5</sup> A nationally-representative 1994 sample found only 15 percent of the population agreeing that “When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.”<sup>6</sup>

One effect of the weakening of child centeredness is clear. A careful analysis of divorce statistics shows that, beginning around 1975, the presence of children in a marriage has become only a very minor inhibitor of divorce (slightly more so when the child is male than female).<sup>7</sup>

1 The TFR in Germany, Spain, Italy and Greece is 1.3; in Japan it is 1.3 and in South Korea it is 1.1. World Population Data Sheet, (Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2006).

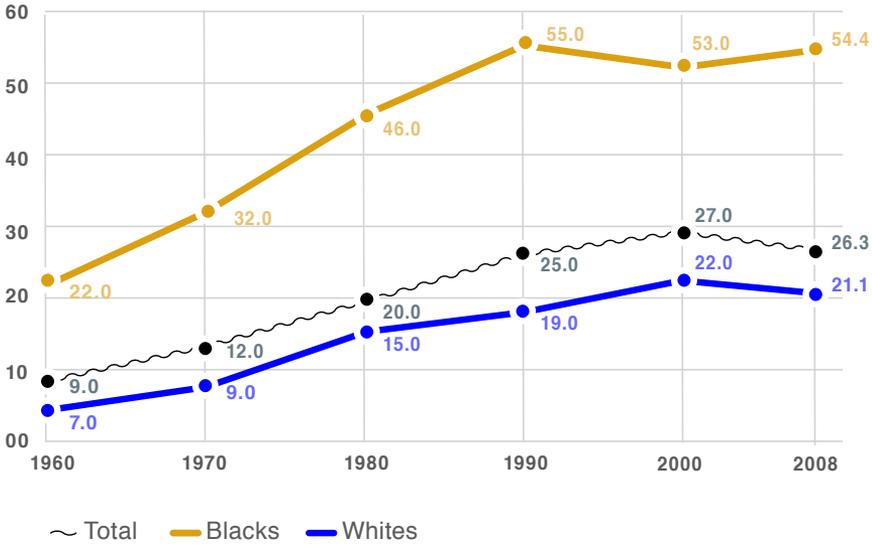
2 James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1990), Figure 22.4, p. 588.

3 Susan Cotts Watkins, Jane A. Menken and John Bongaarts, “Demographic Foundations of Family Change,” *American Sociological Review* 52 (1987), 346-358.

- 4 Tom W. Smith, "The Emerging 21st Century American Family," *GSS Social Change Report* 42, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, 1999, Table 20, 48.
- 5 Arland Thornton, "Changing Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1989), 873-893. This change occurred among women as they grew older, but it is very unlikely to be just an age effect.
- 6 The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.
- 7 Tim B. Heaton, "Marital Stability Throughout the Child-Rearing Years," *Demography* 27 (1990), 55-63; Philip Morgan, Diane Lye, and Gretchen Condran, "Sons, Daughters, and the Risk of Marital Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988), 110-129; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, "Children and Marital Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1991), 930-953.

## FRAGILE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

**FIGURE 10. PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 LIVING WITH A SINGLE PARENT, BY YEAR, UNITED STATES**



**A** Total includes Blacks, Whites and all other racial and ethnic groupings. Over these decades an additional 3 to 4 percent of children, not indicated in the above figure, were classified as living with no parent.

**B** In 2003, the U.S. Census Bureau expanded its racial categories to permit respondents to identify themselves as belonging to more than one race. This means that racial data computations beginning in 2004 may not be strictly comparable to those of prior years.

\* Prior to 2007, the U.S. Census counted children living with two cohabiting parents as children in single parent households. See "Improvements to Data Collection about Families in CPS 2007," ([www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html)).

**SOURCE:** U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P20-537; and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, Current Population Survey, 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement ([www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008)).