

# **THE AMERICAN FAMILY**



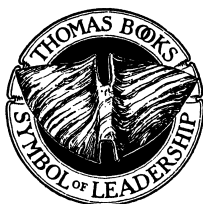
# THE AMERICAN FAMILY

Understanding its Changing Dynamics  
and Place in Society

*Edited by*

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## FOREWORD

Many American universities are known for certain identifiable qualities such as the richness of their long histories, the degree programs that they offer, the level of financial support they have received, their athletic programs, and the scholarship of their faculty members. While these special attributes often shape their identities, most American universities also share special societal purposes. For public universities, one shared purpose often is their dedication to and capacity for public service. Public service can be directed to many different aspects of society and come in many different forms. One important audience for such public service is the family.

From the early colonial period in American history, the family has provided stability, protection, nurturing, motivation, and support for young and old. While change in the American family has been significant since colonial times, in terms of definition, make-up, and perhaps even function, the family continues to be that which explains and provides context for human relationships and development. Universities, through their academic programs and the work of their faculties, teach about the family, conduct research on the family, and offer special programs to inform and serve families. It is through this work that universities not only have impact on families that are already formed, but, through their faculties, students, and programs also have impact on families yet to be formed. This impact itself has the potential to sustain, direct, or, in some ways, redirect the further evolution of the family in society. Fields of study such as education, health, political science, philosophy, and psychology and sociology are often seen as natural areas where these relationships are developed. Meaningful exploration, however, is not limited to these disciplines alone.

Particular areas of study present special opportunities for learning not only more about the American family, but about the American society itself. Family-related issues that pertain to the elderly and the

family, grandparents as child caregivers, adoption, family policy in political and social arenas, family values and traditions, the family's response and adaptation to societal pressures, the family as teacher, and childrearing practices all represent important areas of investigation. The ongoing debate regarding the mere definition of family, in social, legislative, and political terms, also is of great importance, not only with respect to legal matters, but to matters related to health, the economy, education, and human relationships as well.

Even as the definition of family has changed through the years, from a married man and woman and their children living in the same household to varied definitions today, the family holds a vital place in the fabric of the American society. Whether the family embraces a traditional definition, a single gender parent structure, a structure that doesn't involve marriage of the adult partners, a stepfamily structure, a structure of grandparents as parents, or yet some other structure, the family continues to evolve, remain strong, and be an essential part of the American society.

This book of readings from a group of dedicated faculty at one university makes an important contribution to the study of family. The readings that follow explore the changing dynamics of the American family, the family and family values, the family and its influence on the health of children, adoption and family formation, justice in the family, grandparents and the family, the family's role in the education of young children, psychological perspectives of childrearing in the United States, family policy and the U.S. welfare state, and oral narrative and family roles. These discussions represent valuable ideas and perspectives as contributions to this dynamic field of study. The reader of this text will not only develop a deeper understanding of the American family in the historical sense, but also as it has evolved and continues to evolve in modern times. The cross-disciplinary nature of the text is a strength of this study of the family as it allows for the bringing together of different viewpoints of benefit to professionals, students, and lay-individuals alike. It is through this cross-disciplinary perspective that the American family may be better understood and, in many ways, better appreciated for its historic, present-day, and no doubt future impact on the American society.

David A. DeCenzo  
*President*  
*Coastal Carolina University*

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# **THE AMERICAN FAMILY**



## Part I

### THE CHANGING AMERICAN FAMILY

The American family has undergone and continues to undergo significant change as the twenty-first century unfolds. To be sure, this change did not begin with the twenty-first century but much, much earlier. Some might posit that change has been ongoing since the very beginning of the idea of family.

On one hand, there remain today many families that represent the traditional definition of family, that being a married man and woman and biological offspring living in the same domicile. In some ways this definition remains very alive and well. On the other hand, additional family definitions are now a part of the mainstream culture being influenced by social changes such as attitudes toward divorce, marriage partners, remarriage, culture, and values along with economic influences and government practices. To be sure, many more families than ever before are comprised of individuals who are not married but cohabiting; these could be individuals of the same or opposite sex. Families today could also be comprised of households of biological children, adopted children, or both, from a single race, multiple races, or mixed races. Too, families could be grandparent headed with one or no biological parents on the scene and where grandparents are engaged in the carrying out of meaningful and important childrearing responsibilities.

Taking these changes further, some families could be dependent largely upon government subsidies to assist in meeting food costs, housing costs, child care costs, etc. Without question, the U.S. government, through certain legislative actions, has played a significant role in the development of the American family and will continue to have

an important impact on the evolution of the family in the future. Government programs have influenced the supports that many families enjoy and often times depend on. They also have influenced the actual definition of the family in terms of the relationships between the adults in the household.

While the American family arguably remains strong and vibrant, it has changed and continues to change in ways that would have been unheard of and unrecognizable only a few decades ago. Some of the impetus for this change is economic, but also social, cultural, and governmental. The readings in this section discuss some of the changes in the American family as the family continues to evolve during this century. Included are discussions of the family and its historical evolution, government policy and the family, family values and feminism, grandparenting roles, and adoption.



## Chapter 1

### THE 21ST CENTURY AMERICAN FAMILY

*Dennis G. Wiseman*

#### THE AMERICAN FAMILY – THE PAST AND PRESENT

Perspective on the American family, one might appropriately say the changing American family, differs from individual to individual, perhaps even from context to context. Families are more diverse today than ever before, but, diversity alone does not fully explain the significant and ongoing changing nature of the family. The relationship of marriage to the family; socioeconomic influences; culture; the economy; domestic issues and pressures; divorce; remarriage; single-parent; gay and lesbian families; extended families; and governmental policy all need to be considered in an analysis of today's American family. Skolnick and Skolnick (2007, pp. 1–2) comment:

Everybody agrees that families have changed dramatically over the past several decades, but there is no consensus on what the changes mean. The majority of women, including mothers of young children, are now working outside the home. Divorce rates have risen sharply. (But they have leveled off since 1979.) Twenty-eight percent of children are living in single parent families. Cohabitation – once called “shacking up” or “living in sin” – is a widespread practice. The sexual double standard – the norm that demanded virginity for the bride, but not the groom – has largely disappeared from mainstream American culture. There are mother-only families, father-only families, grandparents raising grandchildren, and gay and lesbian families. . . .

There is no doubt that the changing family will see more change to come in the future. Still, people appear to be getting as much joy, and

sorrow, from the family as they ever have, and seem as dedicated as ever in taking part in family life. While in many parts of the world, the traditional family may seem to be shaken, the institution of family will probably experience a longer life than any nation now in existence. Although any specific family may appear to be fragile or unstable, the family system as a whole is tough and resilient (Goode, 2007, p. 14).

The distinction between those who see marriage as the core of the family and those who embrace greater diversity continues to grow. The definition of marriage itself is witnessing considerable debate. Marriage supporters, traditionalists or conservatives, see childrearing and child-caring as the primary purpose of marriage and oppose changes, primarily societal changes, that are believed to have brought about an increase in divorce, childbearing outside of marriage, couples living together but not in a married relationship and same-sex family arrangements. In support of marriage, Congress passed legislation in 2006 that included \$150 million per year for the promotion of marriage (Cherlin, 2008). The logic of the bill was that, by promoting and strengthening marriage, children's well-being, particularly in lower-income families, would be improved (Casper & Bianchi, 2007). Most believe that the legislation was driven, at least in part, by the conservative values brought to the White House by the George W. Bush Administration. Earlier, however, in 1996, under the Bill Clinton Administration, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This legislation identified the government's position toward homosexuality in marriage and stated that the government definition of spouse is a husband or wife of opposite sex from his or her partner.

In support of a broader, more diverse view of family, liberals believe that families of different types should be recognized, whether they include a married couple or not. Many favor extending the legal protection of marriage to same-sex couples, identifying that gay and lesbian couples experience the same kind of intimacy and commitment as opposite-sex couples. Embracing this view, in 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. Canada and Spain, in 2005, became the third and fourth countries, following Belgium and the Netherlands, to legalize same-sex marriage.

The definition of family also can change by culture. Western countries such as the countries of Western Europe and the United States, for example, generally reflect a concept of family represented by parents and children where spouses are freely chosen and the marriage is