

Learning Objectives

- 1.1 Define key concepts in the sociological study of families, including science, institution, norms, roles, and social patterns
- 1.2 Describe patterns of family change and family continuities
- 1.3 Define the concepts of gender, race, social class, and sexuality, and describe how these structures of inequality shape families
- 1.4 Identify demographic characteristics of the U.S. population

Think of the word *family*, and what comes to mind? Is it a husband and wife with a couple of children? Yes, that is one kind of family. But family structures in the United States go far beyond this one image. Consider the following:

- 42 percent of adult Americans have at least one steprelative, such as a stepparent, stepsibling, or stepchild (Pew Research Center, 2011).
- 16 percent of same-sex couples are raising children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020a).
- 25 percent of American children live in immigrant families (Kids Count, 2020a), and tens of thousands of immigrants living in the United States are parenting children who still live in their country of origin.
- One in five Americans lives in a three-generation household (Cohn & Passel, 2018).
- 26 percent of children live with a single parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a).

Contemporary American families are certainly complex, but they have never been simple. In colonial families, because of high mortality rates, the average length of a marriage was less than 12 years, and stepfamilies were more common then than they are today (Coontz, 1992; 2005). Among American women born in the late 1920s, up to 15 percent were pregnant on their wedding day (England, Shafer, & Wu, 2012). Even in the 1950s, when the breadwinner–homemaker family was at its peak, **family diversity** was commonplace: More than one in four married women were employed (Cohany & Sok, 2007); half of children were living in something other than a traditional breadwinner–homemaker family (Livingston, 2015); and one in three Americans older than 65 was poor, a rate that is three times higher than it is today (Semega, Kollar, Shrider, & Creamer, 2020).

Not only is diversity a long-standing feature of American families, so are concerns about family change. In 1642, the governors of the Massachusetts Bay colony decried the “great neglect in many parents and masters in training up their children in learning, and labor, and other employments” (Fass & Mason, 2000, p. 537). In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt wrote a special letter to Congress saying, “There is a widespread conviction that the divorce laws are dangerously lax and indifferently administered . . . resulting in a diminishing regard for the sanctity of the marriage relation” (U.S. Census Bureau, 1909). In the 1950s, sociologists Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales (1955) wrote about the “profound process of change” that the American family had experienced in the early 20th century, including high rates of divorce and more lenient sexual morality.

Compared with today’s patterns, the “lenient” sexual morality, “lax” divorce laws, and “indulgent” childrearing that these commentators were concerned with are anything but. Yet, these concerns, as well as the underlying changes that brought them about, can tell us a few things about American families. First, change is a fact of life, and that is no less true for the **institution** of the family than it is for anything else. Second, not everyone will be happy with those changes, and some level of public resistance will accompany almost every family change we observe. And, finally, idealized images of how families should be can make invisible the complex realities of how families actually are.

Sociological Perspective on Families

Sociologist Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of **sociology** in the 19th century, defined sociology as the scientific study of institutions. Sociologists use the **scientific method**—the careful collection and analysis of data to make appropriate theoretical and **empirical** generalizations—to ask and answer questions about families. This means that social scientists go beyond anecdote and individual experiences to examine carefully collected data in a systematic way. For example, researchers who want to understand how couples divide the housework can’t simply observe housework patterns in their households or the households

of their friends and neighbors. Instead, they must carefully select a sample of couples to observe. And to understand the patterns they observe, they use social scientific theories, abstract statements that make sense of the empirical patterns. In Chapter 3, you will learn more about the theories and research methods that sociologists use to study families.

The second key concept in Durkheim's definition of sociology is *institution*. Sociology studies the family as a **social institution**, a cluster of patterned behaviors governed by social **norms** and enacted by individuals occupying social **roles**. We are so well socialized into institutions that we generally accept them "as the way things are" without much thought or protest. Sociologists work to identify the norms, roles, patterns, and social contexts that shape social institutions and to make them explicit.

Norms are social expectations that guide behavior. For example, one norm of the family institution in the United States is that parents financially support their children. This established behavioral norm is so taken for granted that most people don't even think about it—it is part of the parental role, especially for fathers. Parents who shirk this duty, such as nonresidential parents who do not pay child support, are sanctioned both informally (e.g., by being labeled a "dead beat parent") and formally (e.g., by wage garnishing or jail time). In fact, federal and state governments spend millions of dollars each year to enforce child support compliance. As an alternative, the government could spend those millions of dollars supporting the children directly, rather than using that money to compel parents to provide support. But that would be inconsistent with the social norm that the financial support of children is the private responsibility of their parents.

As an institution, families are also made up of *roles*. A nonexhaustive list of family roles includes mother, father, son, daughter, sister, brother, cousin, mother-in-law, stepparent, grandparent, aunt, and uncle. Usually, one individual enacts multiple roles. For example, I am a daughter, sister, niece, spouse, aunt, and granddaughter. Each of these roles has specific scripts, or rules governing behaviors and interactions, attached to it. The social rules about how to enact the mother role differ from the rules for the father role or the sibling role or the grandparent role. We don't expect mothers, fathers, siblings, and grandparents to behave in the same ways, but we do have fairly clear expectations for each of them.

Of course, role expectations are not static; they change over time, in new contexts, and among different social groups. But once they are entrenched, they can also be resistant to change. For example, in recent years, the expectations for the mother role have expanded to include economic provision, but mothers, even when they are employed, are still expected to be the primary caregivers for children. The contemporary motherhood role has changed to include economic provision even while it continues to emphasize caregiving.

In addition to norms and roles, a third feature of studying the family as an institution is the focus on **social patterns**. Rather than describing or predicting an individual's behavior, sociologists focus on patterns *across* individuals and families. Not all families will exhibit the pattern (in fact, there will usually be many

individual exceptions), but the pattern itself is the focus of sociological analysis. Consider the relationship between age at marriage and divorce. Sociological research has consistently found a negative relationship between these two variables—those who marry at younger ages are more likely to divorce. This empirical pattern describes the relationship between the two variables, but it cannot predict what will happen to any specific couple. In fact, you may be able to think of a couple who is an exception to this pattern, a couple who married young and stayed married for decades. These individual exceptions do not invalidate the pattern, and it is these patterns that are the focus of the sociological perspective.

In 1959, C. Wright Mills used the term **sociological imagination** to describe this focus on social patterns. He distinguished between “personal troubles” and “public issues.” Personal troubles occur within an individual and his or her direct experience, whereas public issues transcend the individual to take place within social and structural context. Mills considered several examples. In the case of unemployment, if only one person is unemployed, one can look to the characteristics of that person to explain why he or she does not have a job. When millions are unemployed, the source of the problem lies in the economy, in the social and structural context that makes jobs scarce or otherwise difficult to find. Mills also considered divorce:

Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate [is high], this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them. (Mills, 1959, p. 9)

Sociologists turn our attention to these structural issues and the patterns of behavior they shape.

Finally, sociologists study institutions within their social contexts. Even though we think about families and households as the “private sphere,” they are anything but private. Our family forms are rooted in historical, economic, political, social, and legal contexts. The characteristics of these contexts will shape the characteristics of families within them. For example, it is more common to see three-generation families living together in expensive cities than in cities with lower costs of living (Waters, Carr, & Kefalas, 2011). The high cost of housing creates a social context in which shared households are more common.

Similarly, the legal context relating to marriage, childbearing, and inheritance defines who counts as a family and who does not. The social movement for the legal recognition of same-sex marriage emerged, in part, because same-sex couples were denied access to family rights including tax-free inheritance, medical decision making, and family reunification in immigration law. Stepfamilies are similarly undefined in the law. Unless a parent's new spouse legally adopts his or her child (which is rare because most children maintain legal ties with both biological parents, and, in most states, children can have only two legal parents), stepparent–stepchild relationships are not legally recognized. Without this legal

tie, stepparents and stepchildren have no formal rights or responsibilities in relationship to each other, which has implications for caregiving and decision making across the life course.

Family Change, Family Continuity

The family patterns we have seen in recent decades—**cohabitation**, divorce, non-marital childbearing, employed mothers, same-sex marriage and childrearing—can seem like radical changes from the past. At first glance, these patterns may challenge fundamental values, identities, and understandings. But when we look at these changes more closely, we can see that they are consistent with broader trends in culture, law, and the economy, many of which have been going on for centuries and around the world. Looking more closely helps us recognize not only change but also **family continuities** over time.

This consideration of both change *and* continuity in families is a major theme of this book. Family changes are evident to most of us. But family continuities, ideological and behavioral threads that link the family patterns of today to those in the past, are an important part of the story as well. For example, arguments for the legal recognition of same-sex marriage are consistent with marital ideals that are more than 100 years old, ideals that emphasize marriage as a union based on romantic love, attraction, and partnership. Similarly, today's high rates of labor force participation among married white women are similar to patterns established by married middle-class Black women in the early 20th century (Landry, 2000). Another continuity is the practice of a wife taking her husband's last name, something that greater than 90 percent of American women still do (Gooding & Kreider, 2009) and that most Americans believe is best for families (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). This practice is rooted in the English common law principle of **coverture**, which stated that a husband and wife were a single legal entity; wives were subsumed under the personhood of their husbands. Legally, she existed as Mrs. John Doe. Although coverture no longer holds as a legal principle in the United States, its ideological foundation continues in marital naming practices. Examples like these demonstrate the ways that families have changed but also how today's patterns are rooted in past practices and meanings.



istockphoto.com/PGGuttenbergUKLtd

Same-sex marriage is consistent with marital ideals that are more than 100 years old.

Family Diversity and Inequality

A second theme that is woven throughout the book is family diversity. The word *diversity* is often used to describe those who differ from some norm. This approach



iStockphoto.com/Kali N'ine LLC

Extended families are central to family life for many Americans.

tends to center the experiences of the dominant group and to examine others as deviations from this norm. This book approaches diversity in a different way: not as a characteristic of those who are different but as a way to describe variation—some families look like X, whereas other families look like Y. Some patterns may be more common than others, but all are families. For this reason, rather than having separate chapters on Black families or single-parent families or same-sex families, this text incorporates families of all types within each chapter. This is an intentional choice to emphasize the way that diversity describes variety among all families, not just those who differ from an ideological or statistical norm.

The sociological perspective accepts family diversity as a given. What sociologists investigate is why variation in family patterns exist and what consequences might emerge. For example, Black individuals tend to have closer relationships with members of their extended families than do white individuals (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2012). There are more frequent calls and visits, more assistance with tasks such as childcare and transportation, and a more inclusive definition of who counts as part of the family. In investigating why, sociologists consider how **extended family** systems offer an adaptation to racial hierarchies. Extended family systems can provide a support system when other kinds of resources are lacking (Stack, 1974).

Thus, family diversity results from the different **social locations** that families occupy. This applies to families who are privileged by their social locations,

as well as to those who are disadvantaged. For example, higher education, an indicator of social class, has become one of the strongest predictors of marital and childbearing behaviors in the United States. Americans with a college degree tend to get married and then have children, whereas those without a college degree are more likely to have children without being married and may forego marriage all together. Both groups are influenced by their social location. Although we often pay more attention to those who are disadvantaged, occupying a privileged position on the top of a social hierarchy shapes family behaviors as much as a disadvantaged position on the bottom does. Understanding family diversity means looking at families in all social locations and at how inequality shapes those family experiences.

Family diversity exists because families, and individuals within them, have differential access to economic, legal, political, and cultural resources. Hierarchies of **gender**, **race**, **social class**, and **sexuality** are especially influential for families. Each of these is a socially constructed system of stratification that divides people into groups and influences how resources are distributed in society. These inequalities shape family experiences and opportunities and create a social context that has a profound influence on opportunities available to American families and on the experiences of individuals within them. In a context where sexism, racism, economic inequality, and heterosexism are realities in American life, families can't help but be shaped by them. This social fact—that “families are embedded in societal contexts in which power and privilege are distributed unequally” (Allen, Fine, & Demo, 2000, p. 2)—is fundamental to the sociological perspective on families.

Gender

The terms **sex** and *gender* are often used interchangeably, but they are distinct concepts. Sex refers to the biological variation in human bodies (Wade & Ferree, 2019), and our sex category is assigned to us at birth, most often based on genital appearance. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the social traits we attach to members of each sex category—the expectations about masculinity that are associated with individuals categorized as male and the expectations about femininity that are associated with individuals categorized as female. A baby with a penis is dressed in primary colors, given trucks to play with, and is viewed as stronger than other babies. A baby with a vagina is dressed in pink ruffles, given dolls to play with, and is viewed as more sensitive than other babies.

Most individuals assigned to the female category identify as a girl or woman, and those in the male category identify as a boy or man. But that is not the case for all of us. Individuals who are **transgender** are those whose gender identify differs from their sex assignment. According to the Williams Institute (Herman, Flores, Brown, Wilson, & Conron, 2017), about 0.6 percent of U.S. adults identify as transgender, double the rate from 10 years prior. In addition, research

from the Centers for Disease Control (Johns et al., 2019) reports that about 2 percent of high schoolers identify as transgender. The category of transgender itself is multifaceted and includes substantial gender diversity within it. For example, a transgender person can be one who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman; was assigned male at birth but identifies as a transwoman; or is genderqueer or gender non-binary, meaning they do not identify as a man or a woman and instead embrace a more fluid gender identity. All of these individuals, as well as others, could identify as transgender.

Race

Desmond and Emirbayer (2020) define race as “a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and historical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category.” This can be broken down into three important points.

First, race is a symbolic category that is misrecognized as natural. The racial categories we use in the United States today are based on social convention, not biology. Although the phenotypical characteristics we associate with race—skin tone, hair texture, eye shape—are genetically determined, these characteristics do not map onto our racial categories in simple ways. For example, we associate dark skin with sub-Saharan Africa, but people with dark skin are indigenous to places around the globe, including Australia, Central America, and south Asia. And think of all the people who identify as Black who do not have dark skin. Race is socially constructed as a symbolic category to capture a shared history and sense of identity. It is not biologically determined.

The idea that race is symbolic rather than natural is also evident in the second point in Desmond and Emirbayer’s (2020) definition of race—that race is based on phenotype or ancestry. That we use both phenotypical and ancestral criteria to classify racial groups, and that these criteria are sometimes in conflict with each other, challenges the idea that race is based in biology, reflecting innate natural differences between groups. For example, for much of American history, anyone with even a single Black ancestor was classified as Black, no matter their appearance. This so-called “one-drop rule” bolstered white supremacy and the supposed purity of whiteness by using ancestry, not phenotype, as the defining feature of blackness. In other contexts, racial categorization is based on phenotype. We see this, for example, in the way the federal government classifies Latinos. According to rules issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that are followed by federal agencies, states, and many researchers, Hispanic is not a racial category and Hispanics can be of any race. This makes sense if one is using a phenotypical definition of race: Latinos represent the full range of skin tones, from very light to very dark. Yet, for many Latinos, it is their ancestral origins in Latin America that shape their racial identity, and most describe their race with their country of origin (e.g., Columbian or Dominican) or the panethnic Latino or Hispanic category. Most non-Latino Americans also

consider Hispanic or Latino its own racial group. Implicitly, the way the government separates Hispanic ethnicity from race uses phenotype as the criterion for racial categorization.

Finally, Desmond and Emirbayer's (2020) definition emphasizes that race is constructed according to specific social and historical contexts. The racial system in place today was created by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries. Prior to this, race was not a defining feature of social organization. Differences in phenotype existed, of course, and societies differentiated between in-groups and out-groups, but those groupings were not based on phenotype. Not only is race a relatively recent invention, even in the modern world, racial definitions vary across time and place. In the 19th century United States, for example, people from Ireland, Italy, and Greece were viewed as racially distinct from Anglo-Saxons. Over time, these distinct racial categories have merged, so that contemporary Americans consider anyone of European descent, including Irish, Italians, and Greeks, as white.

Similarly, panethnic categories like Latino and Asian American are distinctly American categories. Only those who have been socialized into the American understanding of race learn to identify in that way. This illustrates the process of **racialization**. Omi and Winant (1986) define racialization as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (p.111). In the contemporary United States, people from Latin America are racialized into a distinct group called “Latino,” a racial grouping that did not exist 100 years ago and does not exist in any meaningful way in other contexts. Racialization is the process by which racial meanings are created, applied, and negotiated.

Social Class

Social class is a system that stratifies based on financial resources, level of education, occupation, and lifestyle. The most straight-forward way to determine social class is based on income. For example, households can be divided into five classes based on annual earnings: lower (households earning up to \$28,083 in 2019), lower middle (\$28,084-\$53,502), middle (\$53,503-\$86,487), upper middle (\$86,488-\$142,500), and upper (\$142,501 and higher). These income-based definitions are useful, but they leave out more subjective dimensions of social class that are also of interest to sociologists. For example, certain blue-collar occupations have traditionally been defined as working class, even though workers in those occupations can readily earn wages that put them in the upper middle class in terms of income. Sociologists are also interested in social class as an indicator of lifestyle. How one spends one's time, the kind of food one eats, and where one goes on vacation (if at all) can also be indicators of social class.

As you can see, social class is more complicated than simply how much one earns. As Reeves, Guyot, and Krause at Brookings (2018) put it, class can be

about “cash, credentials, or culture.” Which measure one uses depends on the purpose of the investigation and the data available. Throughout the book, you’ll notice that education level is used very frequently as a measure of social class in family studies. It is a more stable measure than income (which varies over the adult life course), and, unlike income, its value is not determined by location (e.g., \$50,000 in Iowa goes a lot farther than it does in California, whereas a bachelor’s degree is a bachelor’s degree no matter where you live). You’ll also learn that social class, as measured by education level, is one of the strongest predictors of family patterns. This is not because people in different class locations have different family values. Rather, it is because economic stability helps to reinforce family stability.

Sexuality

The fourth structure of inequality that shapes families is sexuality. Sexuality refers to how we think about ourselves and others as sexual beings. Like gender, race, and class, sexuality is a concept that is more complex than it might appear on the surface. For example, the idea that sexuality could be an identity did not emerge until the late 19th century. At this time, sexual behavior between men was problematized, and the category of homosexuality (*homo* is prefix from Greek meaning *same*) was invented to describe men who engaged in these behaviors. Heterosexuality was defined at the same time to refer to those who engaged in sexual behavior with the other gender (*hetero* a prefix meaning *different*). Thus, although the full variety of human sexual behaviors has existed since the beginning of time, it is only 130 years ago that these behaviors were redefined as a foundation for an identity.

Today, the term **LGBTQ** is used as an umbrella term to describe sexual and gender minorities: those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. (Although transgender is a gender identity and transgender people can have any sexual identity, transgender is often included in this umbrella term for historical and political reasons). The terminology around **sexual identity** is rapidly changing and, by the time you read this, there may be newer terms in use. This underscores the fact that sexuality is socially constructed and that there is a fluidity in the meanings we attach to sexual behaviors and attractions.

Structures of Inequality

The sociological perspective analyzes gender, race, social class, and sexuality as structures of inequality that exist on the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman, 2018). Thus, these are not simply individual traits; they are also social systems that shape how we define our identities, how we interact with each other, and how social institutions, like the family, are organized. Within these social systems, some groups have access to more resources, opportunities, and social value than others.

For example, social interactions are patterned by gender in that men talk more and interrupt more often than women. People of color are often asked “what are you?” or “where are you from?” These **microaggressions** are defined by psychologists Derald Wing Sue and Lisa Spanierman (2020) as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (p. 36). These interactions also create and reinforce our identities. For example, a Black Dominican interviewed by sociologist Clara E. Rodríguez (2000) describes how most people perceive him as Black, even though he is also Latino. When asked, he describes himself as Black because it is easier to go along with what others expect. His racial identity is shaped by the perceptions and expectations of others.

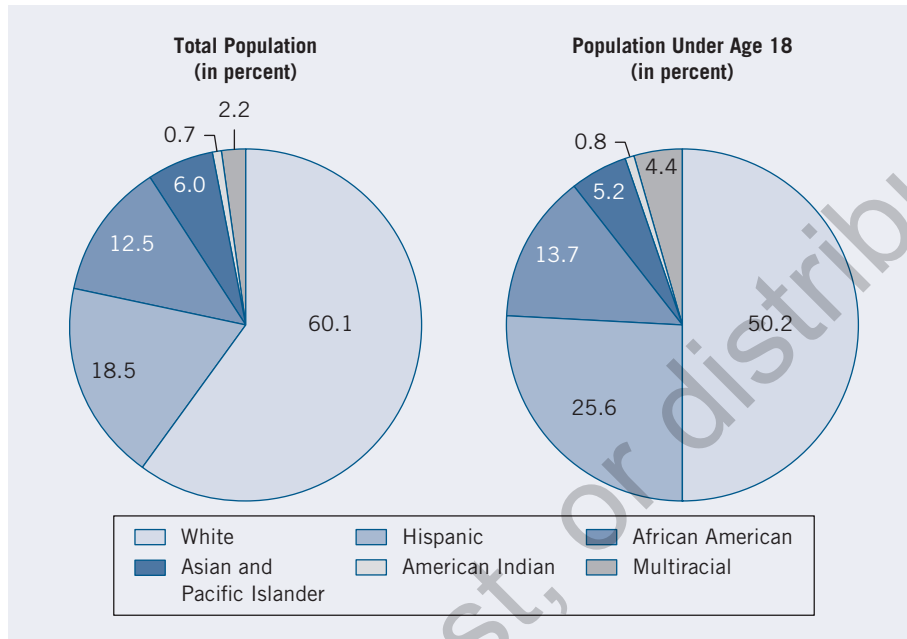
Gender, race, social class, and sexuality also operate on the institutional level. The examples are endless. White households in the United States have 13 times as much wealth as Black households and 10 times as much wealth as Hispanic households (Kochhar & Fry, 2014), a gap that has grown since the Great Recession. Same-sex marriage has been legal throughout the United States only since 2015. Currently, in more than half the states, there are no legal protections against discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations for LGBTQ people (Movement Advancement Project, 2020). Data from the Williams Institute show that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the homeless population and that the most common reason for their homelessness was due to family rejection because of their gender or sexual identity (Durso & Gates, 2012). Daughters in families are often given more chores to do than sons (Raley & Bianchi, 2006), and women’s low pay relative to that of men increases the likelihood that single-mother families will live in poverty.

A Demographic Snapshot of the U.S. Population

Understanding American families means having an accurate picture of the American population more generally. Here, we will take a brief look at six population characteristics that have implications for families, which we will discuss in more detail in later chapters. First is the racial-ethnic makeup of the U.S. population (Figure 1.1).

The chart on the left of Figure 1.1 shows that approximately 60 percent of Americans are white and that Hispanics make up the largest minority group at 18.5 percent of the population. African Americans are 12.5 percent of the U.S. population, Asians and Pacific Islanders make up 6 percent, people who identify as multiracial are 2.2 percent, and Native Americans are about 1 percent of the U.S. population. The chart on the right of Figure 1.1 shows the population younger than age 18. This younger generation of Americans is even more racially diverse. White people make up about half of the population younger than age 18, with Hispanics accounting for 25.6 percent and African Americans 13.7 percent. Americans younger than age 18 are also twice as likely as the general population to

Figure 1.1 U.S. Population by Race and Ethnicity, 2019

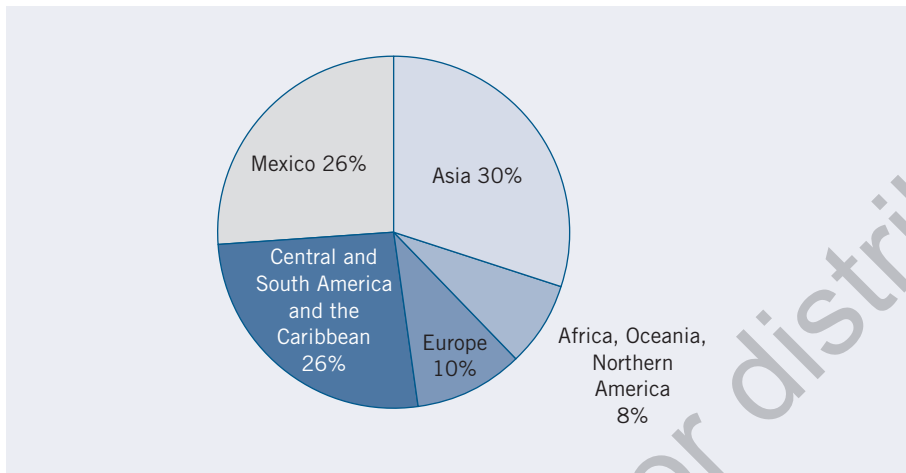


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020b and 2020c

be multiracial, although at 4.4 percent, they are still a relatively small group. That the youngest generation of Americans is more racially and ethnically diverse than older Americans gives us some idea of what the future will hold—an increasingly racially diverse population.

Growing diversity is also evident in patterns of immigration. In 2018, 13.7 percent of the population was foreign born, similar to the percentages at the turn of the 20th century (Budiman, 2020) and lower than the peak of 14.8 percent in 1890. What has changed is the countries of origin for these immigrants. In 1900, 86 percent of the foreign-born population residing in the United States had been born in Europe, primarily eastern and southern Europe (Gibson & Lennon, 2011). In 2019, as shown in Figure 1.2, the largest groups of immigrants were from Mexico (26 percent) and countries throughout Asia (30 percent). Although the size of the immigrant population is large, the immigrant population is not spread evenly across the United States. More than a quarter of the foreign-born population lives in a single state—California—and in 35 states, less than 10 percent of the population was born outside of the United States (Grieco et al., 2012). Three in four immigrants living in the United States are authorized to live and work here, and 45 percent are naturalized U.S. citizens (Budiman, 2020). Since 2007, unauthorized immigration has declined 15 percent.

Figure 1.2 Foreign-Born Population in the United States by Place of Birth, 2019



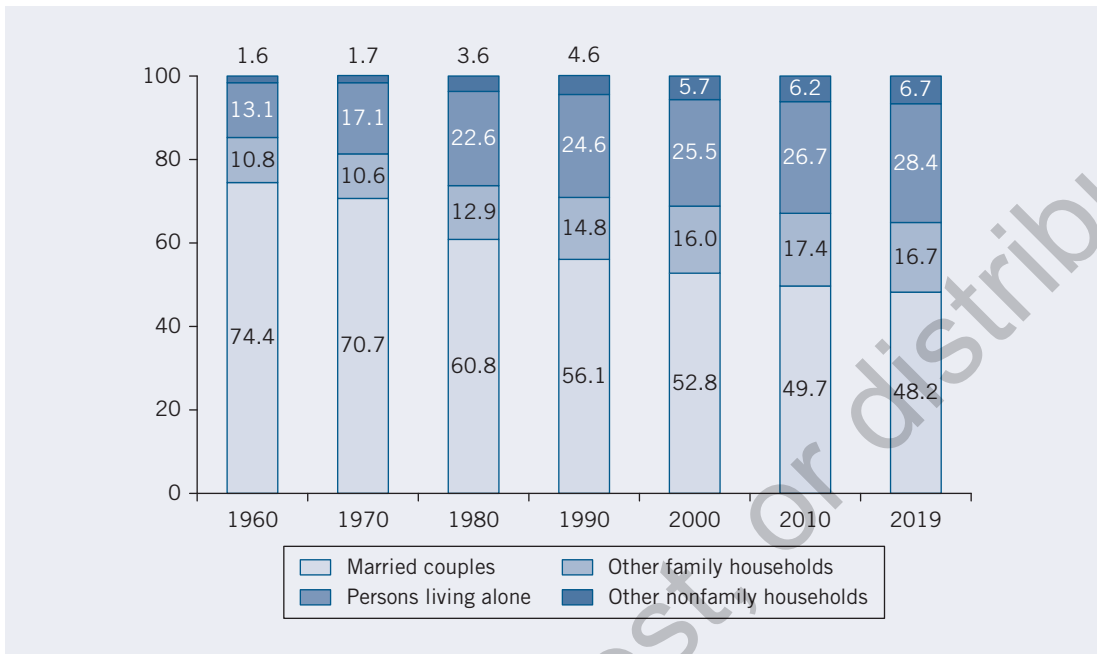
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020d

Another demographic characteristic that influences families is the age structure of the population. In 2019, 16 percent of the population was 65 years of age and older (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020c). The Census Bureau projects that by 2030, this will increase to 20 percent, or one in five Americans. More Americans are also living to the oldest ages. This has implications for intergenerational caregiving, extended family relationships, health care, and government programs like Medicare and Social Security. Like the rest of the population, older Americans are becoming more racially diverse. Chapter 10 will focus on the implications of the aging population for families in more detail.

The growth in income inequality over the past several decades also has implications for families. Since 1967, household income inequality has increased 22 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020e). Only the top 20 percent of households has seen their share of total income increase; the other 80 percent are earning a lower percentage of aggregate U.S. income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020f). You will see throughout this book that many family behaviors—such as marriage, childrearing, divorce, and cohabitation—are differentiated by social class. As inequality continues to increase, we will likely see growing differentiation in family patterns as well.

Figure 1.3 shows how household composition has changed since 1960. Married-couple households went from 74 to 48 percent of all households. Other family households, which includes mostly single-parent families, increased to 17 percent; households consisting of people living alone more than doubled to

Figure 1.3 Households by Type, 1960–2019

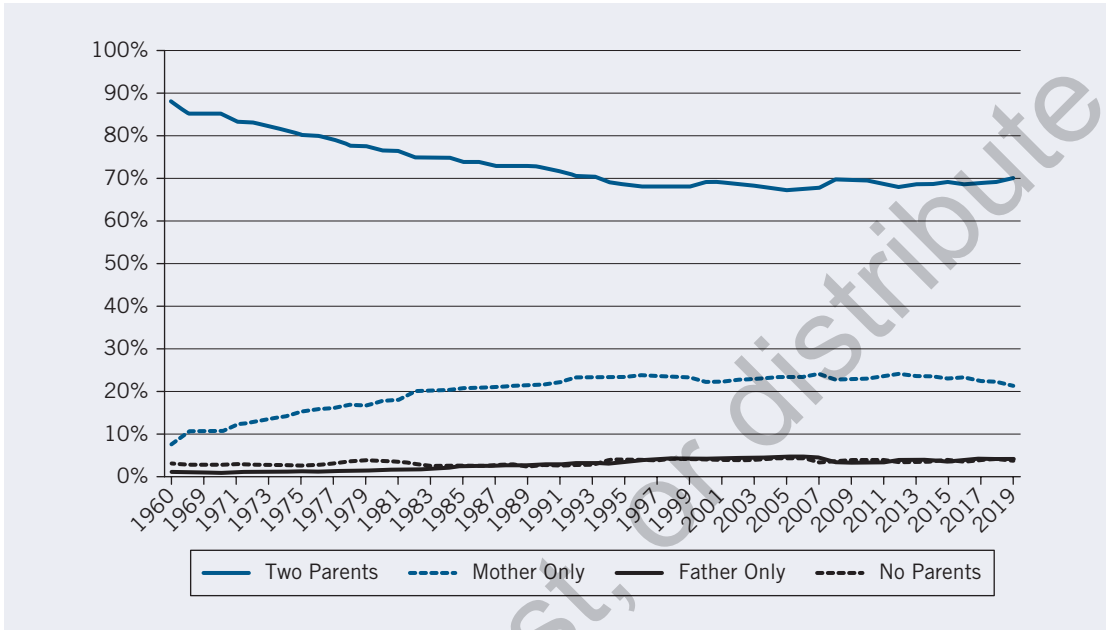


Sources: Rawlings et al., 1979; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019b; and Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013

28 percent; and other nonfamily households, which includes cohabiting couples without children and people living with roommates, grew to 6.7 percent. In these changes, we can see the increasing diversity in living arrangements and family types even as marriage remains most common.

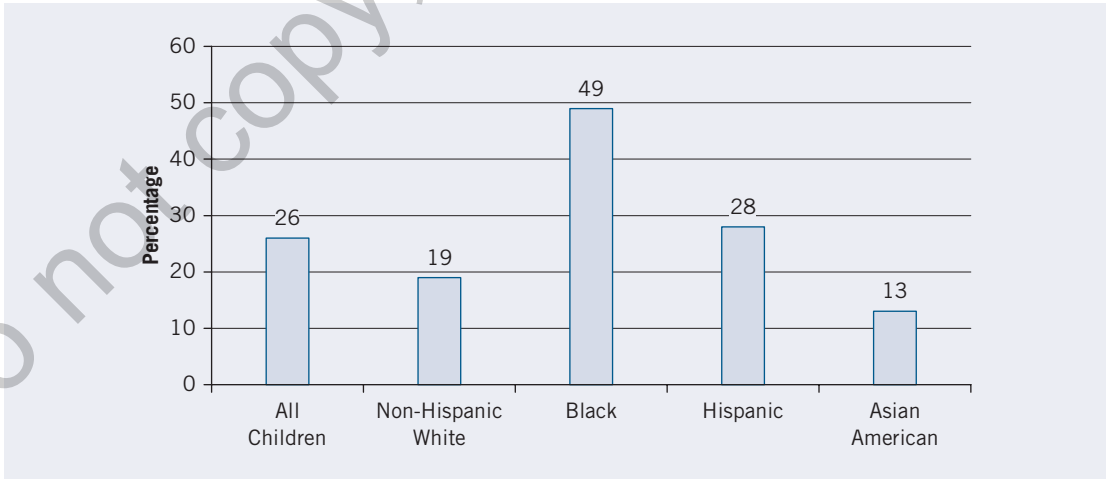
Finally, Figure 1.4 shows children's living arrangements. Most children (70 percent) live with two parents. This is lower than it was in 1960 when 88 percent of children lived with two parents. Of the remaining children, 21 percent are currently living with their mother only, 4 percent with their father only, and 4 percent with neither parent. This latter category has remained consistent since 1960, and although the proportion of children living only with their fathers has quadrupled, it still represents a small minority of children. Most of the decline in children living with two parents can be explained by the increase in children living with their mothers. Figure 1.5 looks at the percentage of children living with only one parent by race-ethnicity. About half of Black children are living with one parent, compared with 28 percent of Hispanic children, 19 percent of non-Hispanic white children, and 13 percent of Asian American children.

Figure 1.4 Living Arrangements of Children, 1960–2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019c

Figure 1.5 Children Living With One Parent, 2019



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019a

Looking Ahead

This text will introduce you to the sociological perspective on families' with a focus on families in the United States. Three themes are integrated throughout. First, you will learn about the ways that families in the United States have changed, but you will also learn how current family patterns are rooted in the past. These continuities help us understand American families in their full complexity. Second, you will learn about the diversity of family structures and processes that exist in the United States. This text treats family diversity as a given and explores how a family's social location in gender, race, social class, and sexual hierarchies shapes their opportunities and experiences. Finally, you will learn to apply your sociological imagination to the study of families. You will analyze families within their social contexts and understand how sociologists use social scientific methods and theories to understand the family as an institution.

In the next chapter, you will begin to see how family changes that took place in the 19th century have set the stage for what we are experiencing today. The shift to an industrial economy led to lower fertility rates and changing definitions of marriage. The romantic dyad became the core of the family, increasing expectations for intimacy and personal happiness. These high expectations, in turn, increased the risk of divorce and, more recently, the incidence of cohabitation. The redefinition of marriage as a relationship based on intimacy, attraction, and personal happiness also set the stage for legal recognition of same-sex couples.

At the same time that these interpersonal changes were taking place, changes in the economy also helped to change family life. The relative economic stability of the 1950s gave way to the instability of the 1970s and beyond. The disappearance of well-paid manufacturing jobs led to stagnation and decline in men's wages, and more women got jobs to support their families. This reduced women's dependence on men, helped to create more gender egalitarian relationships, and made it easier for women to support themselves without being married.

Expanding educational opportunities for young people—to high school in the early years of the 20th century and to college in the later years—has also changed family formation. The rise of the independent life stage, when young people live on their own, without parents or spouses, often hundreds of miles from where they grew up, has also helped to reduce parents' influence on the romantic behaviors and choices of their children (Rosenfeld, 2007). Young adults are left to date, mate, and marry whomever they choose, relatively free from the familial constraints faced by earlier generations of young people. This is not to say that parental influence has disappeared, nor that structural constraints no longer shape how we fall in love (which you will read about in Chapter 5), but compared with earlier generations, young people today have much more choice in their partnerships. As a result, untraditional matches, including interracial, interreligious, and same-sex relationships, are on the rise.

These are just a few examples of how today's family patterns and ideologies are linked to those of the past. They also show how family patterns result from

what is going on in the broader context, although this context does not affect all families in the same ways. Studying families from a sociological perspective provides insights that historical, psychological, or theological perspectives cannot. Sociologists study families as an institution embedded in social context. Learning about the sociology of families will help you understand the variety of ideological, political, and economic forces that shape families and the opportunities available to them. Although sociologists focus on these social forces, we must keep in mind that these forces have a real and direct influence on individual lives. By studying families from a sociological perspective, you will begin to recognize these interconnections between individuals and society.

Chapter 2 discusses how family is defined and the implications of these definitions. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the theories and methods that sociologists use to study families. Chapters 4 through 10 focus on specific areas of family life: the transition to adulthood; marriage and cohabitation; divorce and relationship dissolution; childhood; parenting; family work; and the family lives of older adults. Chapter 11 discusses family violence, and Chapter 12 pulls together the major themes of the book and asks you to consider the future of families. By the time you finish this text, you will have a deeper understanding of contemporary U.S. families and how the sociological perspective can be used to understand them.

MAIN IDEAS

- Family change has always been a feature of U.S. families.
- Sociology is the scientific study of institutions. Sociologists who study families consider norms, roles, patterns, and social context.
- Today's families are characterized by both change from and continuity with families in the past.
- Families in different social locations have differential access to resources, which creates family diversity and inequality.
- Gender, race, social class, and sexuality are structures of inequality that shape the opportunities and resources available to families.
- U.S. demographic patterns, including racial-ethnic structure, immigration, age structure, income inequality, and household composition, create the context for contemporary families.

Do not copy, post, or distribute