

Article

What Changing American Families Mean for Aging Policies

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During the latter half of the twentieth century, the American family underwent radical changes that, in conjunction with dramatic increases in life expectancy, have greatly altered the reality of aging. In our post-traditional, multicultural society, one can no longer speak of “the” family, as if it exists in a singular form. Instead, families come in diverse forms that also change in composition over time. These shifts are the result of many factors—including divorce and remarriage, cohabitation, lower fertility, multipartner and nonmarital fertility, permanent singlehood and childlessness, same-sex relationships, and interracial/interethnic unions. A serious consequence of this diversity for aging is that public policies based on ideal, narrow, or outdated definitions of family often conflict with the reality of families as they really are.

These new configurations affect the resources and options that families have for giving and receiving eldercare. Increasingly, the simultaneous presence of multiple generations over many decades at any single moment, many of which need assistance, further complicates caregiving and other responsibilities. The hard times associated with the recession have only increased the vital role that family support plays in ensuring the well-being of elders, and elders in ensuring the well-being of other family members, in the United States. Minority groups face additional challenges in providing care in light of their social and economic disadvantages.

These social trends raise critical questions for public policy about growing social and economic inequalities among American families, which threaten core values of equity, efficiency, liberty, and security. In this essay, we consider a few of these issues and their implications for aging families and aging policies.

Divorce, Remarriage, and Relationships With Children

In only two generations, gender norms and expectations concerning work and family for both men and women have changed drastically. Women now in their 50s and 60s have come to know a world in which marital disruption have become common, and younger generations of women cannot count on husbands for economic security (Angel, Prickett, & Angel, 2014).

Women have to a great extent been liberated from old scripts that bound them firmly to family roles. However, the increasingly fragile nature of marital relationships today coupled with women’s less-than-complete or less-than-continuous labor force attachment has put more recent generations of women at financial risk as they grow older. Divorce, in particular, constitutes a threat to women’s economic security. When marriages last less than 10 years, women also lose the ability to draw Social Security benefits through their spouses.

Public discussion of divorce and remarriage is often about younger couples with underage children and shorter marriages. And yet, divorces among older couples with grown children and long-standing marriages are increasing in the United States. The divorce rate for longtime marriages has doubled since 1990 and tripled among those 65 and older (Brown & Lin, 2012). For older women who find themselves newly single, divorce may be financially detrimental due to less retirement savings, fewer housing assets, more debt, and little time to restore their 401(k) accounts (Lin & Brown, 2012). For those experiencing divorce at any age, concerns emerge regarding the meaning of step-relations and the support to which stepchildren (and step-parents, later in life) are entitled. This is especially true for Boomers, for whom step-relationships are prevalent.

For generations past, women's lifelong commitments to family and to managing multiple roles may make it easier for women to find support in family relationships and to manage and adjust to the changes and strains associated with aging. The greater human capital of more recent cohorts of women suggests that women will soon have new resources and choices as they move into later life, though one wonders whether women's greater investments at work will take the same kind of toll on their relationships with children as it has for fathers.

Men's family relationships are especially important to watch, particularly those between fathers and children. The widespread prevalence of divorce is particularly important to understand because divorce generally leads to a loss or restriction of fathers' ties to children. Unlike women, divorce for men, even in late life, often results in a quick remarriage or serial monogamy and often involves additional children within the context of new relationships. These responsibilities can jeopardize support to and from children of prior relationships. Because minority children in father-absent families are at serious risk of poverty, incarceration, child abuse, and health problems, the fertility and relationship behaviors of African-American and Hispanic men are of critical concern to policymakers.

Other subgroups of men, however, are making bigger investments in their children, which may end up being protective in later life and in ways that prior cohorts of fathers did not benefit, given their more distant relationships with children. Cohorts of young men currently entering adulthood have, in aggregate, more fluid attitudes about masculinity and manhood, which may open up men's experiences in friendships and family relationships, thus resulting in deeper and more resourceful ties in old age. The growing instability of the male workforce and its corresponding losses in income and benefits, however, will also reduce the economic resources available for men to provide for themselves and others, consequently undermining their traditional earner roles and making the need to nurture relationships even stronger.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Recent years have seen a sharp increase in grandparents (especially grandmothers) who are primary caregivers to grandchildren. In 2009, 7.8 million children under the age of 18 lived with at least one grandparent, a 64% increase since 1991, and more than twice as many minority children lived with grandparents than their non-Hispanic white counterparts (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Nearly 1 million of these children depended solely upon grandparents as their parents struggled with a variety of problems, including financial incapability, drug and alcohol addiction, AIDS, mental health issues, incarceration, intimate violence, and divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Although many grandparents report positive outcomes from raising grandchildren, these responsibilities often have negative consequences on caregivers' financial well-being—including loss of salary, the need to draw on retirement savings or postpone retirement, and reduced pension (Meyer, 2014).

In order to reduce burden on custodial grandparents, many of whom live on fixed incomes, public programs provide some assistance. States like Georgia offer a full range of child support services to custodial grandparent households. In addition to redirecting child support from the parent to a grandparent, caring for the child can allow the grandparent to receive emerging and crisis intervention, child care for preschoolers, foster care training, and mental health counseling and family therapy. Other states use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a federal-state block grant program, that provides cash, food stamps, and free or low-cost day care to grandparent caregivers (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). At the federal level, there are tax abatements, including the Earned Income Tax Credit, child tax credit, and child dependent care credit, depending on the income eligibility of employed grandparents.

Though limited, the National Family Caregiver Support program offers caregiving assistance to grandparent caregivers over 55 years old who assume the majority of the responsibility for their grandchildren (Administration on Aging, 2012; Whittier, Scharlach, & Santo, 2005). According to the U.S. Census, 69% of grandparents who are fully responsible for their grandchildren are not yet age 50, and about 19% are under age 40 (Ellis & Simmon, 2014). Rather than aiding grandparent caregivers to care for children, these programs may end up discouraging grandparent involvement.

Minority and Immigrant Families

The geographic dispersion and mobility of immediate family members creates new challenges for the reservoir of care for elders. Although this is true of families broadly, it is especially true of immigrants, who comprise a growing

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proportion of the older population. However, the implications of immigration for aging depend on how old individuals are when they migrate. For example, Mexican-born individuals who come to the United States in later life depend heavily on family members to manage poor health and disability. These immigrants have few job skills and are ineligible for social services for at least 5 years under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, thus straining these families. Periods of low unemployment and relative economic prosperity may make this burden more bearable for families with dependent members.

Studies of older racial minorities and immigrants suggest that these groups have stronger cultural expectations for family support. For example, Hispanic families generally, and Mexican-Americans in particular, benefit from a strong family orientation and system of informal family support, which also reduces the use of nursing homes. At the same time, Hispanic families are undergoing changes that will affect their ability to continue caring for their elders: Increased women's participation in the labor force, geographic dispersion, and frailty and disability now make it difficult for Latino families to maintain traditions of nearly exclusive informal care of elders—especially because these families constitute a largely disproportionate share of the poor (Angel & Angel, 2015). Policies aimed at providing care to elders must be sensitive to cultural expectations related to both care giving and care receipt.

Globalization also affects sources of elder care. Immigrants make up a disproportionate fraction of low-wage care workers employed in entry-level jobs, and as a result play a vital role in filling the “care gap” for elders, especially for the oldest-old. However, foreign-born care workers may not be able to respond adequately to Boomer's higher expectations for quality long-term care services. From a formal care standpoint, policies attempting to limit the influx of health care workers, including physicians from other countries, could hurt elderly populations in medically underserved areas. From an informal care standpoint, late-life immigrants will increasingly need intensive care from family members in light of the lack of eligibility for government programs. Thus, redesigning Medicare and Medicaid to help diverse families care for their aging parents deserves serious consideration.

Singlehood and Childlessness

Single Americans are at an historic high in the United States. Nonmarried adults over the age of 25 make up about 20% of the adult population in 2012 compared with 9% in 1960 (Wang & Parker, 2014). Childless people tend to be engaged with their families—parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews—and develop supportive friendship networks. Older single men, on the other hand, have a greater propensity to be more isolated than single women and their married counterparts. As a result, they rely less on family for support and often turn to formal sources of support in the event of poor health.

Paradoxically, childlessness cuts both ways in terms of contributions to social policy: In aggregate, it may strain Social Security funding (given the ratio imbalance of retirees to workers) and it also reduces government spending on children (given that most welfare programs bear a heavy bias toward providing benefits to families with children, and fertility declines have been observed across social class lines) (see also Moffitt, 2014). In the short term, childlessness may potentially be a significant political issue because childless couples subsidize the education and well-being of other people's children. Many couples in their 30s are choosing to remain “child free.” Notably, “Millennials” now comprise the largest segment of the workforce and are nearly equal the population of Boomers. In contrast with earlier generations, Millennials are less optimistic about the support and stability of a nuclear family structure, and they worry about managing the high costs of parenthood. In 2013, the average cost of raising a child up to the age of 18 is projected to be about \$250,000 (Lino, 2014).

Same-Sex Couples and Families

Other groups are left out of, or have a tenuous place in, laws and policies. Here, gay and lesbian couples and their children are clear examples. Whether or how they have recognition carries important implications for the aging of all members, including the protections and resources to which they have access.

Social Security has done more for families than most other policies. Yet under current Social Security law, cohabiting partners and same-sex partners in states that do not permit them to marry have no claim to Social Security or survivor benefits of their partner, even if they lived together throughout their working years. However, the issues of Social Security linked to spousal rights in same-sex marriage are evolving. Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act, which restricted benefits to heterosexual married couples, was ruled unconstitutional in 2013, meaning that

same-sex couples are no longer automatically denied federal entitlements.

Prolonged Parenting

Because the transition to adulthood takes longer today, parents across all social classes are providing much more support to their adult children, thus affecting their resources in middle age and late life (Settersten, 2011). Further, the unprecedented prevalence of attention deficit, hyperactivity, and autism spectrum disorders among children creates difficult long-term circumstances for these parents and children as they age.

Meanwhile, new generations of parents produce new kinds of children, and there is evidence that parents are closer and more connected to their younger children than prior generations (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Given this, one wonders whether these cohorts of children will in the future feel stronger obligations to give support to aged parents, and whether these cohorts of parents will in the future have stronger expectations that it be provided.

Intergenerational Financial Exchanges

Inequalities are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the financial exchanges and inheritance within families and across generations. Social Security and Medicare affect the likelihood of private financial transfers by making it possible for parents to conserve resources so that they have wealth to transfer to children prior to or upon their death (Angel & Mudrazija, 2010). We have much to learn about how family gift giving is affected when the provisions of the government are made more generous or more frugal, and how these patterns are affected by the diversity of family relationships and marital transitions noted earlier. Depending on the quality of relationships, transfers between parents and stepchildren are significantly less substantial than those between parents and their biological children.

As trends in marital dissolution continue upward, complex family structures may weaken the commitment to support elderly parents, especially elderly fathers. Likewise, older parents' ability to help their grown children financially may be more restricted because they are afraid of outliving their retirement savings. The fear is most real among women who live longer and receive significantly less income during retirement than men (Angel et al., 2014). Federal legislative proposals like the Retirement Security Act of 2015 may provide a partial solution. This bill greatly expands the ability of Americans, especially low-income workers and those working at small companies, to better save for their retirement by making retirement plans

more affordable. Women are particularly likely to benefit from these provisions because of their high concentration in low-wage jobs and greater likelihood than men of being employed at small businesses (National Federation of Independent Business, 2014). To help secure a steady stream of income throughout retirement, one policy tool is to provide tax incentives that encourage women and all Americans to use lifetime annuities.

Intergenerational Inequalities

At the societal level, social inequalities among American families and between generations pose important challenges for aging families and social policy. Future funding of entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare will depend on the bonds between younger and older generations. Generational equity debates, which seem likely to ensue, will determine if future generations of workers will receive a fair rate of return on their investment compared to their lifetime contributions to the Social Security system, or if more episodic employment and marriage experiences will undermine adequacy of old-age security in decades to come.

While the majority of enrollees in Medicaid are children, the elderly and individuals with disabilities account for nearly two thirds of all Medicaid funding (Hearne & Topoleski, 2013). These tensions seem likely to grow as an increasing number of Boomers need long-term care and spend down to Medicaid eligibility. Medicare enrollment is also anticipated to be the major force that significantly increases public health care spending in the future, fueled largely by prescription drug benefits (Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, 2014).

The changing racial and ethnic composition of the United States also threatens to fuel tensions about generational equity, especially among Hispanics, who make up majorities in many states and a large fraction of the labor force that will support tomorrow's retirees (see also Murdock, Cline, & Zey, 2015). If these groups are confined to the low-paying service sector, which in addition to low wages offers little access to health insurance for the poor, race, and ethnicity will interact with age to reinforce disparities that may give rise to generational conflicts.

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Conclusion

Altogether, these issues illustrate the fact that complexities of family life today raise new questions regarding who is responsible for the care of the aging population, what this population will inevitably need in terms of formal and informal sources of support, and how they will get it. Aging brings pervasive caregiving demands for spouses and middle-aged children. These responsibilities can jeopardize financial resources, make it impossible to maintain paid work, strain psychological well-being, and have repercussions on younger generations. Families and governments at all levels are faced with challenges related to the allocation of limited resources for the care of vulnerable members of society—both young and old. This issue of *Public Policy and Aging Report* takes a fresh perspective on aging policies, considering them with the richness and complexity of families as they actually exist, not as they once were or one might wish them to be.

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