



# Chapter 4 Family

Two Barry sisters and Beverly Lawrence stare in amazement as they learn of American biologist Alfred Kinsey's findings on female sexual behavior. Photograph taken August 20, 1953. Courtesy of UPI/Corbis-Bettmann.

The marriage rate was lower at the end of the century than ever before. The average age at first marriage, which fell to an all-time low during the baby boom, climbed to an all-time high by the close of the century.

The marriage rate generally rose and fell with the business cycle. The 1990s, with conspicuously low marriage rates in years of unprecedented prosperity, were exceptional. The marriage rate is conventionally calculated as the annual number of marriages per one thousand unmarried women over the age of fifteen. Unmarried women may be single, widowed, or divorced. A rate based on unmarried men would produce a similar pattern.

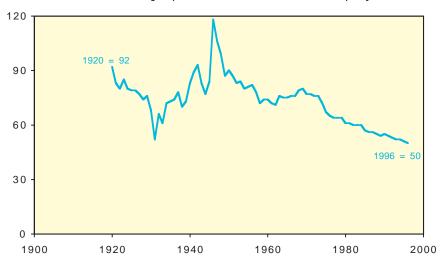
The highest rate observed since the beginning of the national series was 118, registered in 1946 as millions of soldiers left the armed services and embarked on married life. Until the 1990s, the lowest rate was 52, registered in 1931, when the Depression abruptly lowered the incomes and living standards of most of the American population. As the upper chart shows, that record was broken in 1995, when the marriage rate dropped to 51. In 1996, the rate fell to 50.

The married proportion of the adult population fell from 66 percent in 1980 to 59 percent in 1997—about the same percentage as in 1931. Part of this decline reflected an increase in the number of elderly widows, the result of an aging population in which women had greater life expectancy, and part was attributable to an increase in the average age at first marriage.

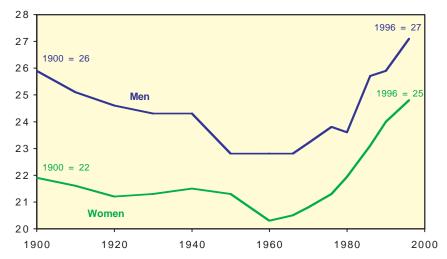
In 1900, as the lower chart shows, the typical young groom was almost twentysix and his bride was four years younger. For the next half century, couples approaching the altar grew steadily younger and the age difference between bride and groom diminished. In 1960, the bride was just over twenty and the groom was under twenty-three. This trend reversed around 1970, and by 1996, the grooms were somewhat older than their counterparts in 1900, while the brides were substantially older.

One out of three men and more than one out of four women in their early thirties were unmarried in 1997, compared with fewer than one in ten in 1900. Still, between 80 and 90 percent of Americans got married during their lifetimes.

**Marriage Rate**Number of marriages per thousand unmarried women per year



Marriage Age Median age at first marriage



#### At the beginning of the century, very few women were sexually active before marriage. By the end of the century, most of them were.

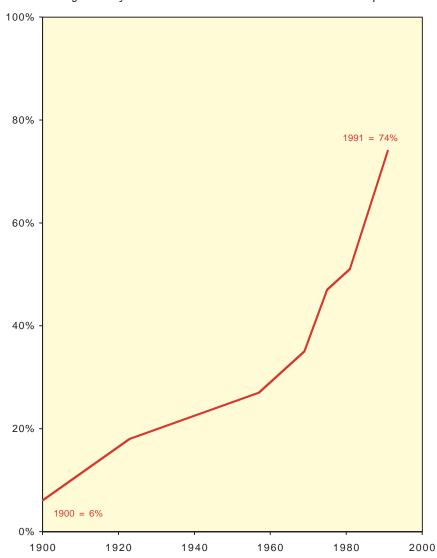
Large-scale research about sexual activity in the United States did not begin until Alfred Kinsey's 1948 study, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, and a companion volume about females published in 1953. Before that time, the subject had been in the closet. Thus, most of the quantitative information about sexual activity in America during the first half of the century is based on retrospective interviews with middle-aged and older people. To make matters worse, some of Kinsey's sampling methods and interpretations were questionable.

After the Kinsey era, research about sexual activity flourished. In Kiss and Tell: Surveying Sex in the Twentieth Century, Julia Ericksen refers to hundreds of sex surveys. But as she points out, this collective effort was impeded by ideological conflicts, linguistic ambiguities, unrepresentative samples, and the tendency of ordinary people to give less than truthful answers about sensitive matters.

Nevertheless, the trend shown in the chart is supported by sufficient evidence. Although the data on which the chart is based are neither uniform nor precise, there is little doubt about the general pattern the chart displays. It indicates that at the beginning of the century, most American women entered their first marriages as virgins. At the end of the century, about one-quarter of them did. In the second half of the century, some of this difference may have reflected the tendency of women to marry at later ages than they did earlier in the century. But from 1900 to 1960, the increase in premarital sex occurred at the same time as a drop in the average age of first marriage.

At each point in time and at any given age, the percentage of men with premarital sexual experience was significantly higher than the corresponding percentage of women, and the percentages of black men and women with premarital sexual experience were higher than the corresponding percentages of white men and women.

**Premarital Sexual Activity**Percentage of 19-year-old unmarried white women with sexual experience



## The cohabitation of unmarried couples became common in the last decades of the century.

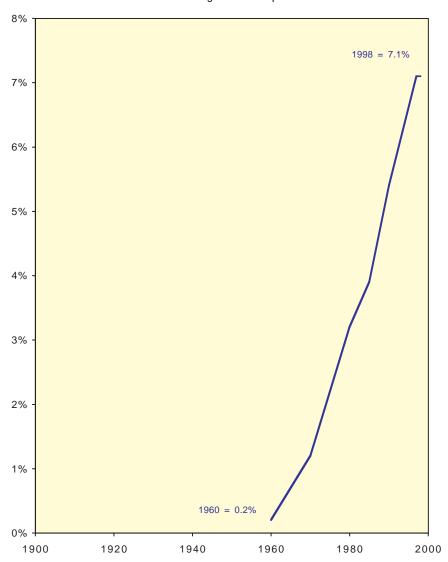
Cohabitation was considered disreputable ("living in sin"), often illegal, and quantitatively unimportant throughout most of the century. It became legal around 1970 with the removal of statutory restraints such as false registration laws, which prevented unmarried couples from checking into a hotel, and customary restraints, such as the refusal of landlords to rent to unmarried couples. As the chart indicates, by 1998, more than 7 percent of all American couples were cohabiting. Their actual numbers increased eightfold, from 523,000 couples in 1970 to 4.2 million in 1998.

While the chart represents a time series of cross-sections, data from longitudinal surveys provide a more in-depth look at this trend. The 1987–1988 *National Survey of Families and Households*, for example, found that 44 percent of those who married between 1980 and 1984 had cohabited with someone beforehand. The 1995 *National Survey of Family Growth* found that 51 percent of women aged thirty to thirty-four had cohabited before marriage or were cohabiting at the time of the survey. At the end of the century, a large proportion of newlyweds lived together before the wedding with the full knowledge of their relatives and friends. Many cohabiting couples rented an apartment or purchased a house together with no more difficulty than married couples.

For some couples, cohabitation was something like the "trial marriage" advocated by family reformers in the 1920s. If the trial was successful, the couple married within a few months or years. Unsuccessful unions were terminated more quickly.

Like other types of familial behavior, the propensity to cohabit was influenced by age, ethnicity, and education. Those most likely to cohabit were young adults, non-Hispanic whites, and people who never graduated from high school.

**Cohabiting Couples**Percentage of all couples



#### Extramarital sexual activity followed a downward trend.

The declining incidence of extramarital sex may seem implausible to television viewers who see a world of wholesale promiscuity in which marital fidelity is the exception rather than the rule. The data tell a different story. The earliest bars in the chart are based on the original Kinsey studies, published in 1948 and 1953, which have been challenged on the grounds of defective sampling. But studies of marital adjustment conducted between 1929 and 1950 produced similar results. The remaining bars on the chart, based on the 1992 *National Health and Social Life Survey*, show an unmistakable decline in extramarital sexual activity during the latter part of the century, especially among married men.

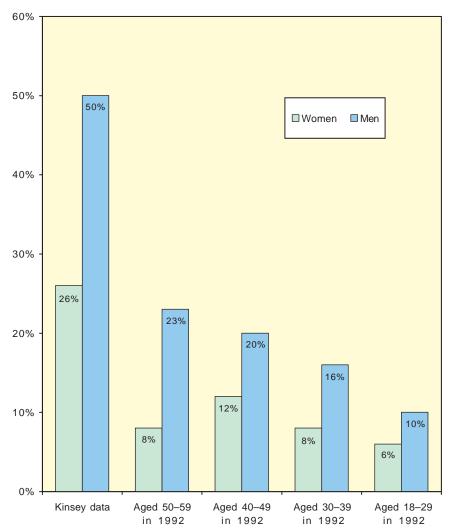
The trend might be explained by the fact that the average older respondent in the sample had been married longer and therefore had more exposure to extramarital temptations. But that explanation would not hold for female respondents. For example, many more women who reached twenty-one around 1968 reported extramarital relationships than those who came of age a decade earlier.

According to the 1992 *National Health and Social Life Survey*, the most authoritative study of American sexual practices, "The vast majority of men and women report that they are monogamous while married or living with a partner. Over 90 percent of the women and over 75 percent of the men in every cohort report fidelity within their marriage, over its entirety."

One likely source of the declining incidence of extramarital sex is the increasing ease of divorce, which allows people to leave unsatisfying marriages.

#### Married Persons with Extramarital Sexual Experience

Percentage of each cohort



## Tolerance of premarital sexual activity increased steadily, but tolerance of extramarital sex remained extremely low.

These conclusions about the level of tolerance for premarital and extramarital sexual activity are based on data from the *General Social Survey*, an omnibus inquiry that was first administered to a national sample of Americans by the National Opinion Research Center in 1972 and repeated annually or biennially thereafter. The two questions charted here were asked sixteen times between 1972 and 1996, with remarkably consistent results. Although the series is regrettably short, it is long enough to confirm the public's growing tolerance of premarital sexual activity and steadfastly low tolerance of extramarital sexual activity during the last quarter of the century.

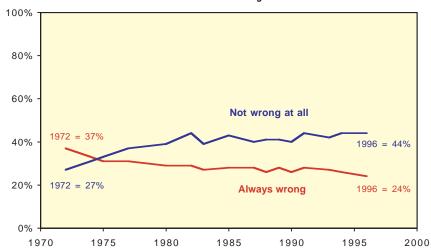
The proportion of respondents expressing full tolerance of premarital sex ("Sex before marriage is not wrong at all") rose from 27 percent in 1972 to 44 percent in 1996 with some variability along the way, as shown in the upper chart. During the same interval, the proportion of respondents expressing unqualified intolerance ("Sex before marriage is always wrong") declined from 37 percent to 24 percent.

The trends in attitudes toward extramarital sex shown in the lower chart are very different. The proportion of respondents expressing full tolerance of extramarital relations ("Sex with a person other than one's spouse is not wrong at all") never rose above 4 percent during the twenty-five-year period. In fact, the level of tolerance for extramarital sex seems to show a downward trend, never exceeding 2 percent between 1988 and 1996, but the percentages are too low for the trend to be considered reliable. The proportion of respondents expressing unqualified intolerance of extramarital relations ("Sex with a person other than one's spouse is always wrong") rose from 70 percent to 78 percent during the quarter-century.

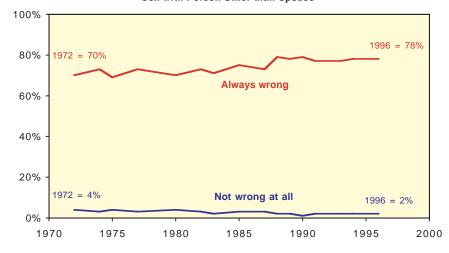
#### **Attitudes toward Premarital and Extramarital Sexual Activity**

Percentage expressing each opinion

#### Sex before Marriage



#### Sex with Person Other than Spouse



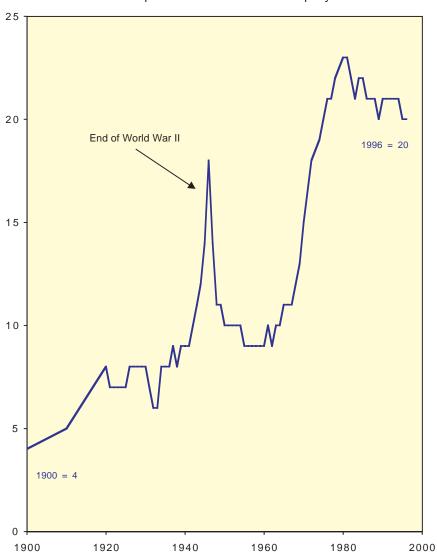
The divorce rate rose unevenly but substantially from 1900 to about 1967, when the introduction of no-fault divorce led to a doubling of the rate during the subsequent decade to a level that was sustained through the closing years of the century.

The U.S. divorce rate (divorces per thousand married women in a given year) approximately doubled from 1900 to 1960, when the national divorce rate stood at nine. During that time, divorce typically required an innocent spouse as plaintiff and a guilty spouse as defendant, except in Nevada, which typically required the legal fiction of residence in that state. Then, between 1967 and 1975, no-fault divorce laws, which allowed divorce by mutual consent, were adopted throughout the United States. The divorce rate promptly rose to twenty in 1975 and, except for a slightly elevated rate from 1978 to 1985, remained at about the 1975 level for the subsequent two decades. The National Center for Health Statistics has not published this series for the years beyond 1996. If the 1996 level of divorce is maintained, however, approximately four of ten marriages contracted in 2000 will end in divorce.

The typical pattern of divorce did not change perceptibly after 1975. The median duration of marriages broken by divorce was about seven years; about half involved children. The propensity to remarry declined somewhat, but the large majority of divorced persons eventually remarried. Almost half of all marriages involved at least one previously divorced partner. Second and third divorces were not uncommon, and most of them were followed by remarriage as well.

American opinions about divorce were curiously divided. While many survey respondents—a majority in some surveys—disapproved of divorce in general and wanted the process to be made more difficult, those same respondents generally condoned particular divorces that involved their relatives and friends. By 1998, a number of states, beginning with Louisiana, were experimenting with "covenant marriages," which gave couples the option to be married under a special statute whereby they gave up the right to an easy divorce.

**Divorce Rate**Divorces per thousand married women per year



#### The decline in the share of U.S. households maintained by a married couple proceeded slowly until 1970 and accelerated thereafter.

Married couples headed 80 percent of U.S. households in 1910 and 71 percent in 1970; by 1998, however, married couples maintained just 53 percent of all households. In addition to the rise in unmarried cohabitation, this trend had two major components: an increase in the number of people, especially older people, who lived alone; and an increase in the number of families maintained by one person, usually the mother.

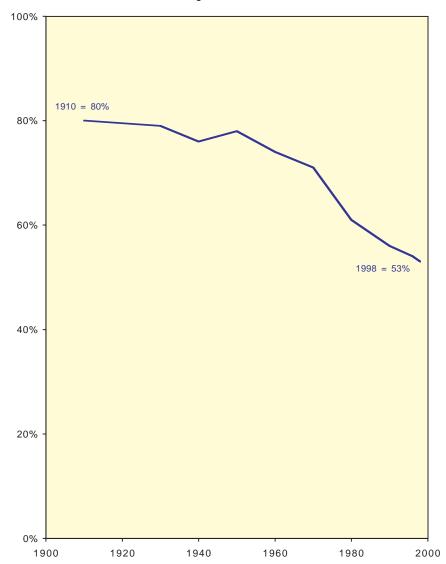
At the end of the century, a substantial majority of the white population continued to live in households maintained by married couples. In 1998, women maintained just 21 percent of white families with children under age eighteen. That is a significant proportion, but it hardly signifies the collapse of the traditional family pattern.

The pattern was quite different for the black population. Among black families with children under age eighteen, only 38 percent were headed by two parents in 1998. Mothers maintained a majority—57 percent—of these families.

As single-parent families became more prevalent, so too did the number of people living alone or with unrelated individuals or in institutions (at colleges or in the military, for example). Between 1970 and 1996, the number of Americans who did not live with relatives more than tripled from 15 million to more than 40 million.

Another way of looking at these trends is to examine the erosion of private support for a large part of the population. In 1910, nearly all married women obtained their subsistence from the earnings of their husbands, nearly all young children from the earnings of their fathers, and many older people from the earnings of their adult children. By the end of the century, the majority of married women were no longer wholly supported by their husbands; millions of young children and their mothers were supported by the government; and most older people lived on some combination of their own savings and government contributions, without significant support from their children.

# Households Headed by a Married Couple Percentage of all households



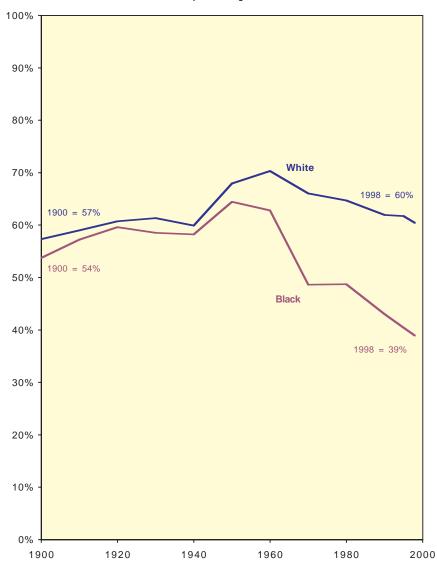
#### The proportion of the population that is married varied considerably, with the lowest points occurring at the beginning and the end of the century.

The proportion of white women who were married at any given time rose irregularly from a low of 57 percent in 1900 to a high of 70 percent at the peak of the baby boom in 1960. The percentage began to decline after 1960, and by the late 1990s, it was again approaching the level of 1900.

During the first half of the century, the share of black women who were married differed little from that of their white counterparts. But the incidence of marriage among black women began to fall before the baby boom was over, and the gap between black and white women widened significantly. Although the proportion of black and white women who were married differed by no more than 4 percentage points during the first half of the century, the gap expanded to 21 percentage points by 1998. This disparity was even greater for young women. Among twenty-nine-year-old women, for example, 52 percent of blacks but only 19 percent of whites described themselves as "single—never married" in 1990. Proportionately more black women than white women reported themselves as separated, and significantly more as widowed or divorced, particularly at older ages. The marital characteristics of Hispanic women, recorded separately only since 1970, were closer to those of white women than of black women.

The trends displayed in this chart, combined with trends in nonmarital births and cohabitation, suggest that by the end of the century, the black population of the United States had entered uncharted territory with respect to the pattern of their personal relationships and the composition of their households. But it is equally clear from the chart, and from a substantial volume of additional data, that similar trends were under way in the rest of the American population, both white and nonwhite, with long-term consequences that are difficult to predict.

**Married Women by Race**Married women as percentage of all adult women



# Women's fertility declined during the early decades of the century, increased during the baby boom, and declined sharply thereafter.

Early in the century, the total fertility rate stood at 3.8 children per woman, down from about 8 children per woman in 1790. The total fertility rate is an artificial measure of the average number of children that women have during their lifetimes. Specifically, it is the average number of children that a woman would have if, throughout her childbearing years, she experienced the prevailing fertility rate for each age group. A total fertility rate of 2.1 represents the generation-togeneration replacement level, under current mortality conditions. At that rate, a woman would produce one daughter who survives to childbearing age, yielding neither population gain nor loss over time, apart from immigration.

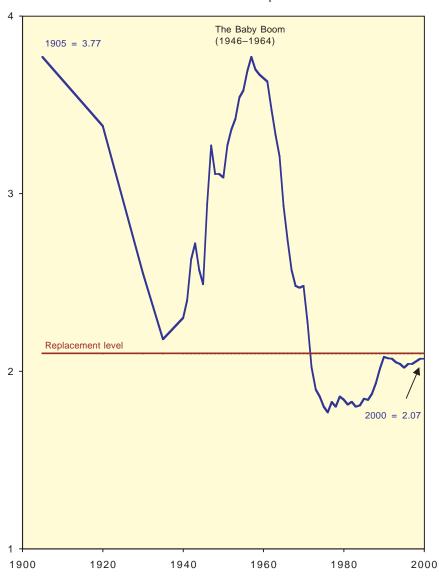
The total fertility rate of 3.8 children per woman in the first decade of the twentieth century was part of a longer-term decline that began during the nation's industrial revolution in the nineteenth century and continued until 1930, hovering near the replacement level during the decade that followed. The baby boom brought the rate up to a peak of 3.8 children per woman in 1957, but an even sharper decline in fertility ensued after 1960. The rate dipped slightly below the replacement level in 1972 and remained in that zone thereafter, reaching a record low of 1.8 in 1976, and then rising slightly in subsequent decades. During the last quarter of the century, the fertility of U.S. women remained below the replacement level.

The total fertility rate of nonwhite women was about one child greater than that of white women in the early 1900s, 4.9 versus 3.6 children per woman. The fertility gap narrowed in the decades that followed, but returned to a difference of one child more per woman from 1953 to 1966. In subsequent years, however, the nonwhite-white gap in women's fertility narrowed steadily. In 1997, the fertility rate for non-whites was 2.2 children per woman compared with 2.0 for their white counterparts.

Most of the reduction in fertility was accomplished technically by contraception and the advent of legal abortion. Condoms were the most common method of birth control for married couples in 1935. Oral contraceptives replaced condoms as the modal form of birth control by 1973. By the end of the century, surgical sterilization was the most common method of birth control for married couples.

Reliable statistics about abortion in the early part of the century are impossible to obtain. The gradual state-by-state legalization of abortion accelerated suddenly in 1973, when the Supreme Court struck down most restrictions in its *Roe v. Wade* decision. The number of legal abortions began a steep climb, reaching about 1.5 million in 1980, then declining somewhat to 1.4 million in 1996. The principal effect of abortion was to reduce the number of nonmarital births; more than 80 percent of abortion patients were unmarried.

**Total Fertility Rate**Lifetime number of children per woman



#### Births to unmarried women increased sharply after 1960.

What used to be known as illegitimate births in the first half of the century came to be called out-of-wedlock or nonmarital births during the second half. This evolution in terminology mirrored a massive change in social and legal norms: sanctions were no longer imposed on unmarried women who bore children, and the ancient stigma of bastardy was no longer recognized by law or public opinion.

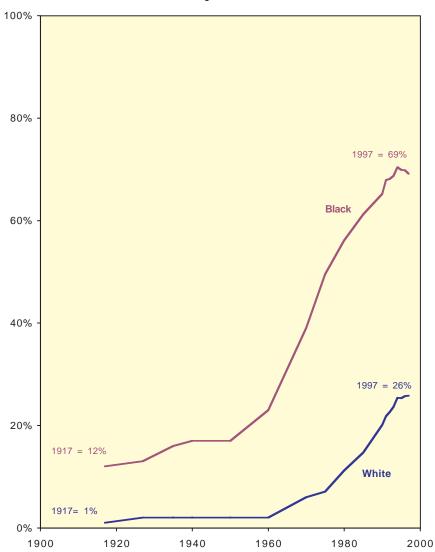
Nonmarital births were always more common among black Americans than among whites, but as recently as 1950, the great majority—83 percent—of black mothers were married, with a husband present. The trend in the second half of the century changed significantly. Less than a quarter of black infants were born to unmarried mothers in 1960, but the comparable figure for 1997 was 69 percent.

The rise in white nonmarital births was even more startling because there was little history of even partial tolerance in this sector of the population. Until the 1960s, young women who became pregnant outside of marriage were encouraged to stay in special institutions and give up their infants for adoption. Before the advent of reliable contraception and legal abortion, any nonmarital pregnancy was considered unintended and unwanted.

This began to change in the 1960s, when intentional childbearing by unmarried women came to be tolerated, if not fully approved. By 1997, 26 percent of white infants were born to unmarried mothers, up from only 2 percent in 1960. The parents of a considerable number of these infants eventually married.

In the 1990s, the rate of pregnancy among teenagers declined significantly, particularly among blacks. From 1991 to 1997, the birth rate among women aged fifteen to nineteen declined 15 percent. This trend may well presage a decline in nonmarital births.

**Nonmarital Births** Percentage of all births



#### The time and attention that American parents devote to their children increased significantly.

The steady and impressive increase in the number of hours, excluding family meals, that both mothers and fathers spent with their children each day emerged from the Middletown community surveys of 1924, 1977, and 1999. The three surveys were based on random samples of married couples with children under age eighteen.

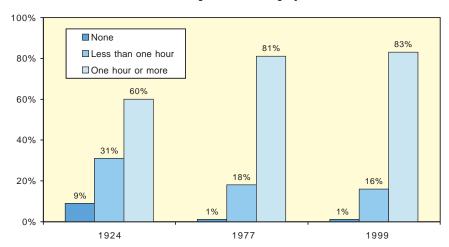
In the 1999 survey, 83 percent of fathers reported spending an hour or more each day with their children, up from 60 percent in the 1924 survey. Among Middletown mothers, 71 percent indicated that they spent two or more hours with their children every day, compared with only 45 percent of those surveyed in 1924. The change from 1924 to 1999 becomes even more impressive in light of the increased employment of married women, along with the lengthening of the school day and school year.

The simplest explanation for this change is that both men and women spent fewer hours on the job and much less time doing housework (see pages 34 and 36). As a result, they had much more free time in 1999 than in 1924 and slightly more in 1999 than in 1977.

But other factors were involved as well. The Middletown surveys provide abundant evidence that the generation gap—the cultural divide between parents and children—was much wider in 1924 than it was in 1990. Most of the 1924 parents had grown up in rural areas before the era of the automobile and the radio. Most had not finished high school. The world of their children was relatively strange to them. By contrast, most parents in 1999 had the same urban background and outlook as their children. They watched many of the same television programs and followed the same sports. Despite many areas of disagreement and conflict between parents and children, they did not have the fundamental communication problems that earlier generations experienced. Moreover, parents at the end of the century were encouraged by the educational system and the media to take parenting seriously in ways that would never have occurred to their greatgrandparents.

#### Average Daily Father-Child Contact in Middletown

Percentage in each category



# Average Daily Mother-Child Contact in Middletown Percentage in each category

