

The American family: is it obsolete?

By Jacquin Sanders
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For the past year or so, sociologists, psychiatrists, Women's Lib activists and others who ought to know better have been predicting the demise of the American family. But somehow, family people don't seem to be getting the message.

Stubbornly unaware of their supposed plight, more than 92 per cent of all Americans continue to live in families. In fact, there has been a 10 per cent rise in the number of families since 1960.

And despite the sobering 1-in-every-4 couples divorce rate, more than three times as many people got married last year as got divorced. And a good many of the marriages included previously divorced persons.

Yet the pessimism seems almost pervasive. Church groups, governmental task forces and prominent foundations issue report after report on the "dissolution" of family life. Scarcely a major magazine has failed to weigh in with a foreboding article on the same glum subject. Even the White House has been used to trumpet warnings of doom for the family.

"America's families are in trouble--trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of our nation," declared the final report of last year's White House Conference on Children.

Yet there they all are, some 170 million strong, family men, women and children, in their split-levels and elevator apartments and farmhouses, their estates and their tenements and their two-family homes.

They divorce more, and the women are out of the home working, and some of the children are in day-care centers, or ought to be. But whatever the condition--rich or poor, urban or rural--the family way, with all its tensions and imperfections, remains for the vast majority of Americans "the only game in town."

The main reason, of course, is children, and if anybody yet has come up with a better way of raising children than in a family situation, he hasn't been able to sell it to the country's parents, or, more

importantly, to those who want to become parents.

"No society anywhere has ever sanctioned illegitimacy," says Margaret Mead, a sociologist who nevertheless finds many flaws in the modern family.

But rather than abolish it entirely, she recommends strengthening the institution by what she calls a "two-step marriage," with official licenses for both steps.

In the first, the young couple would, after a "wedding" ceremony, live together but agree not to have children. If the arrangement works well for a substantial period of time and the couple decide they want children, they would move on to step two, with a second license and a second wedding ceremony.

These days, to be sure, many young couples don't bother with Miss Mead's ceremonies. They simply move in together and, at least in their own generation and in the large cities and university areas they inhabit, nobody much minds. These unmarried couples are frequently pointed to as harbingers of the trend against marriage.

More likely, they represent the sexual revolution--which is not at all the same thing as a revolution against marriage--and the security of the Pill. It has also been noted that very few of them produce babies and that when they do they almost invariably marry in the old legal way.

The spread of communes also alarms many who think these more or less self-sufficient clusters of young people represent a wave of the future. Perhaps they do, but it will be a small wave, judging by most of those already in existence.

There are an estimated 3,000 communes in rural and urban areas in the U.S., with membership varying from half a dozen or so to as many as a hundred. These communes are a Western world phenomenon. But except in Israel, where they are thoroughly integrated into the political system, communes have yet to prove their durability.

"I joined a commune to get away from the hassle, the senseless disciplines I didn't believe in," says one dropout from a New Mexico commune. "But we found that we couldn't make the thing work without

our own kind of law and order. As it turned out, I didn't appreciate taking orders from my elected leaders much more than I did from those on the outside. So I came home for a while."

Coming home seems to be a feature of both the commune people and the unmarried couples. "I've watched these people, and this is not maturity," says a professor at Hunter College in New York. "They're really not much different from their age group in other years--just freer sexually and sassier. Their life-style is superficially new but it's impermanent. Ultimately, they'll all be back in the fold."

The declining birth rate is also frequently cited as a symptom of the dissolution of the family. But this is clearly a matter of choice and convenience in a crowded world. For instance, a Gallup poll taken earlier this year showed a dramatic decline in the percentage of Americans who favor having four or more children. As recently as 1967, 40 per cent wanted big families; now only 23 per cent do.

But they still want families. Indeed, the most intense criticism of families comes from a small, but very articulate section of the public: upper-income, sociologically or psychologically oriented people whose needs--and frustrations--are quite different from those of the bulk of the population.

Tell a Detroit auto salesman that Ferdinand Lundberg says in "The Coming World Transformation" that the family is "near the point of complete extinction," and he will merely look bemused. Tell a Los Angeles steam-fitter that psychoanalyst William Wolf contends that "the family is dead, except for the first year or two of child-raising" and he will accept it as he would a pronouncement from Bozo the Clown.

That family structure has changed, no one can doubt. That it could stand a lot of improving, no one can question. Families are smaller, they badly miss the influence--and services--of elderly relatives, and they may be doing something wrong somewhere because there's so much anger in the nation's youth.

But despite its tribulations, it seems highly likely that the family will survive. The alternatives are too dim--or grim.

