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Science and the Future of the Family

At the present accelerating rate of depletion, the United States will run out of families not long after it runs out of oil. The proportion of married households out of total households declined from 72.5 percent in 1965 to 64.9 percent in 1976. While the average annual rate of decline was 0.33 percent for the first 3 years of this period, it tripled to 0.97 percent for the last 3 years. Depending on one's assumptions about how this acceleration will progress, the United States will have not a married household left a generation or so from now. This is not to be taken as a prediction; it simply projects a past trend into the future at the same rate of acceleration. The projection suffices, however, to show that the family is an endangered species, which it may require a conscious collective effort to save as part of our social ecology. Clearly if this decline is not to continue, some powerful forces will have to intervene to reverse the trend.

However, before great personal or public efforts to reinvigorate the family can be expected, and indeed legitimately called for, serious scientific effort is needed. Matters of evidence loom large. Several theories have been advanced which hold that disintegration of the "traditional" family is far from a sociological disaster, sure to undermine the basic cell of the societal organism; instead, it is a step toward higher and better forms of living. It is argued that the breakup of the traditional family is beneficial to both adults and children because it paves the way to freer, more egalitarian, less sexist arrangements. Still others argue that institutions (child care centers, communal living) can and ought to replace the family altogether.

Counterarguments are just as readily advanced. While both critics and defenders of the family have a role to play in clarifying the issues, a good many of the questions are primarily empirical. For example, do children, especially young ones, suffer or benefit—how so and how much—when they have one parent instead of two? How well or badly do most children cope with the stresses of parental divorce and remarriage, with relating to a step-parent, especially one different in personality or background from their natural parent, and other members of the "reconstituted" family? Do people learn the lessons of failed first marriages and make better second marriages? Are "alternate" families and marital patterns (such as communal families and contractual marriage) really more emotionally satisfying and less constraining than traditional marriage and the nuclear family? What do lasting or satisfying marriages have in common, and how do public policies, societal attitudes, and educational efforts influence those attributes?

There have been scores of studies of these questions, but none of them has the scope and definitiveness necessary to come to grips with the issues. By and large, consisting of a small sample here and a limited survey there, they do not provide the reliable and comprehensive picture necessary either to help settle the arguments between the defenders and the detractors of the family, or to justify or argue against a concerted societal effort to restore family stability.

A major research initiative involving a coordinated cluster of projects is needed to provide information regarding the issues raised above and related ones. A national commission may well be necessary to consider the public policy implications of the findings of such a research program. While the preservation or disintegration of the family may at first seem a highly personal matter, one soon realizes that it is affected by public policies concerning welfare, taxes, Social Security, divorce, child care, and so on. Once we are armed with more definitive data about the effects of family disintegration, we shall know whether we ought to try to reverse this trend or, if the critics of the family are correct, urge it on.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Columbia University, New York 10027, and Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027*