Social Distancing Was a Problem Before Covid

Marriage and childbirth rates, declining for years, reached new lows during the pandemic.

By Peggy Noonan, Nov. 25, 2021 3:00 pm ET

On this family holiday weekend, a look at a study of the American family. It's called "The Divided State of Our Unions: Family Formation in (Post-)Covid America" and comes from the Institute for Family Studies, the American Enterprise Institute and the Wheatley Foundation. It's based on two surveys conducted by YouGov for IFS and Wheatley.

When the pandemic came, marriage and fertility rates in America had already been falling steadily. Last year the marriage rate fell to 33 per 1,000 of the unmarried population, and the lifetime fertility rate to 1.64 per woman—"levels never seen before in American history," as per the study. (Fertility has been below the "replacement rate" of 2.1 for more than a decade.)

The authors considered three possibilities. One was that marriage and fertility would simply continue downward. Another was a "renaissance scenario"—the loneliness, dislocation and existential questioning of the past year and a half would produce a new appreciation for the idea of family, a longing for and desire to make them. The third was that "economic, religious, and partisan divides in family formation" would "deepen" in Covid-19's wake.

The report found most evidence for the third scenario. The desire to marry among single Americans ticked up 2 points since the pandemic, but 17% of Americans 18 to 55 reported their desire to have children had decreased, while only 10% said it had increased. And Covid might have "poured fuel" on the fissures. Interest in family formation varies by income, religion, even partisan affiliation. The rich, the religious and Republicans have a "relatively greater propensity" to marry.

There was one area of convergence. Historically the poor and less educated have been more likely to have children. “But childlessness is rising among less-educated, lower-income men and women, a trend that COVID seems likely to amplify. This would bring childbearing trends among the poor closer to those of more educated and affluent Americans.”

The conclusion: “As the pandemic lifts, the nation is likely to see a deepening divide between the affluent and everybody else, between the religious and the secular, and between Republicans and Democrats in their propensity to marry and have children.”

Interest in family formation is higher among the religious. This has been true for a while, and the pandemic sharpened the divide. The desire to marry increased by 8 points overall among unmarried Americans who regularly attend religious services. The desire to have children fell a little among those who attend religious services at least once a month and by a net 11 points among those who never or seldom attend services.

The desire to marry increased by 5 points among unmarried Republicans and 3 for Democrats—but it fell by 4 points for independents. The net desire to have children rose 1 point overall among Republicans but fell 11 for independents and 12 for Democrats. (The study includes data from Gallup indicating that religious Americans navigated the trauma and challenges of the pandemic better than those with no ties to organized religion. For many, faith was a lifeline.)

Yuval Levin, director of social, cultural and constitutional studies at AEI, wrote of the study this week in the Dispatch, focusing on the larger picture of declining family formation. He believes we haven’t fully come to terms with a deeper meaning of the long-term data. In the past when we thought of social disorder, we approached the subject in terms of restraining passions. Humans have appetites for pleasure, status, power; when these things aren’t well-directed and joined to human commitments they can leave lives deformed. Maybe now we must begin to see a different kind of

disorder, one that looks less like ungoverned human desire and more like desire's diminishment—"an absence of energy and drive leaving people languishing."
Many bad things in our society are abating. The divorce rate last year hit a 50-year low; teen pregnancies are at their lowest rate since the 1930s; out-of-wedlock births reached their height in 2008 and are declining. The abortion rate may be lower than it was when the Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. But, Mr. Levin notes, positive behaviors are also declining: "There are fewer divorces because there are fewer marriages." "Fewer teenagers are dying in car accidents because fewer teenagers are getting driver's licenses." It isn't only teen sex that's declining, it's teen dating. "There is less social disorder, we might say, because there is less social life."

Normal human misbehavior hasn't gone anywhere, but it's being joined by a more profound and fundamental problem: "disordered passivity—a failure to launch, which leaves too many Americans on the sidelines of life." Restraint and self-discipline chip away at wildness, "but what if we fail to act on our longings to begin with?"

Are many of the young failing to "get on with life"? If so, why?

The new passivity is global, and further along in parts of Europe and Asia. "Social inertness," Mr. Levin writes, is surely a response in part to the breakdown of the traditional social order itself: the waning of "life scripts" provided by family, religion and traditional norms. Younger Americans are "less sure of where to step and how to build their lives." They have probably received, too, an exaggerated sense of the material challenges presented by marriage and parenthood: "Many younger Americans now think it was much easier than it really was for their parents to live on one income or have that additional child."

We are seeing "a rising generation acutely averse to risk, and so to every form of dynamism," and this trend isn't confined to the young. "Excessive risk aversion" is deforming other areas of American life, from child rearing to work and public leadership. And it seems intertwined with a more general tendency toward inhibition and constriction—we see this in speech and conduct codes, which leave

Americans “walking on eggshells around each other in many of our major institutions.” This new ethos “stifles the public arena while denying us recourse to private arenas and tells us how not to behave without showing us how to thrive.”

And of course the internet, which turns a personal life into performance, “where we display ourselves without really connecting.” More people are “functional loners.” Erotic energies are dissipated into substitutes, such as pornography, which has grown into “a hideous, colossal scourge that our society has inexplicably decided to pretend it can do nothing about.” That part should be underlined.

A change in the character of social breakdown doesn’t require arguments for self-discipline but a case for exertion and activity—for gambling on life and joining it. “We have to make a deeper, warmer argument—a case against giving up that is rooted in what we have to gain not just by living but by living well.”

It would be an argument “for the good of life.” We must “persuade human beings to overcome passivity and paralysis and jump into life.”

This is all true.

We are all pilgrims. At some point you must trust life, trust God, and push off.

This is offered just in case you run out of things to talk about at the table.