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# Policy Brief

## **Social Class, Family Complexity, and Intergenerational Relations**

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Public discourse in the United States increasingly overlooks the working class. This is unfortunate for many reasons, one of them being the great changes that have occurred in what we might call the working-class family and the implications of these changes for intergenerational relations. As today's middle-aged working class adults age into the older population, these alterations in family life will age with them. When they do, new problems in intergenerational relations – in feelings of obligation and commitment, in assistance up and down the intergenerational chain – may emerge.

In this policy brief, I briefly review the evidence regarding changing social class identification, recent economic shifts that have impacted the working class, and the rising complexity among American families. Then I consider the implications of these trends for intergenerational relations in general and social support given to, and provided by, older adults. I identify a series of questions that are critical to understanding social class inequalities of care, obligation, and assistance within the older population.

### **The Missing Working Class in the United States**

In his State of the Union addresses, President Barack Obama has used the term middle class 28 times. But he has never said “working class” except in 2011, when in reference to Vice-President Joe Biden, who was seated behind him, he said, “We may have different backgrounds, but we believe in the same dream . . . That dream

is why a working-class kid from Scranton can sit behind me.” In his 2015 address the President argued that his proposals would benefit “every middle-class and low-income family with young children” - as if there were no one in between. But in fact millions of families fall between the college-educated middle class and the poor. They tend to be headed by people who have a diploma but not a bachelor's degree: In 2014, among all families with children under age 18, 54 percent were headed by an adult who had the first but not the second, according to tabulations from American Community Survey data.

The aversion to the term working-class is not limited to elected officials. According to a search of Google News for all American news stories in 2014, middle-class appeared 1,990,000 times, whereas working-class appeared 39,200 times – a ratio of 51 to 1. The members of the media also are uncomfortable using the term. To be sure, the working-class label has long been mildly pejorative. In television series of earlier decades, such as "The Honey-mooners" and "All in the Family," the working-class man was sometimes depicted as a buffoon or bigot. Today, as the college-educated middle class has expanded and factory work has declined, the working class has come to be seen as encompassing those who haven't made it economically. Politicians and reporters may prefer to call working-class families by the class position they aspire to rather than the one they hold. To lump the working class together with the college-educated is to create a group that is so broad that it becomes meaningless.

Few Americans will volunteer that they are in the working class, but many accept it once they are presented with the term. The longest series of comparable survey questions about class identification is in the American National Election Studies, which has been conducted in every presidential election year since 1956. The studies aren't perfect for tracking the working class because the inter-

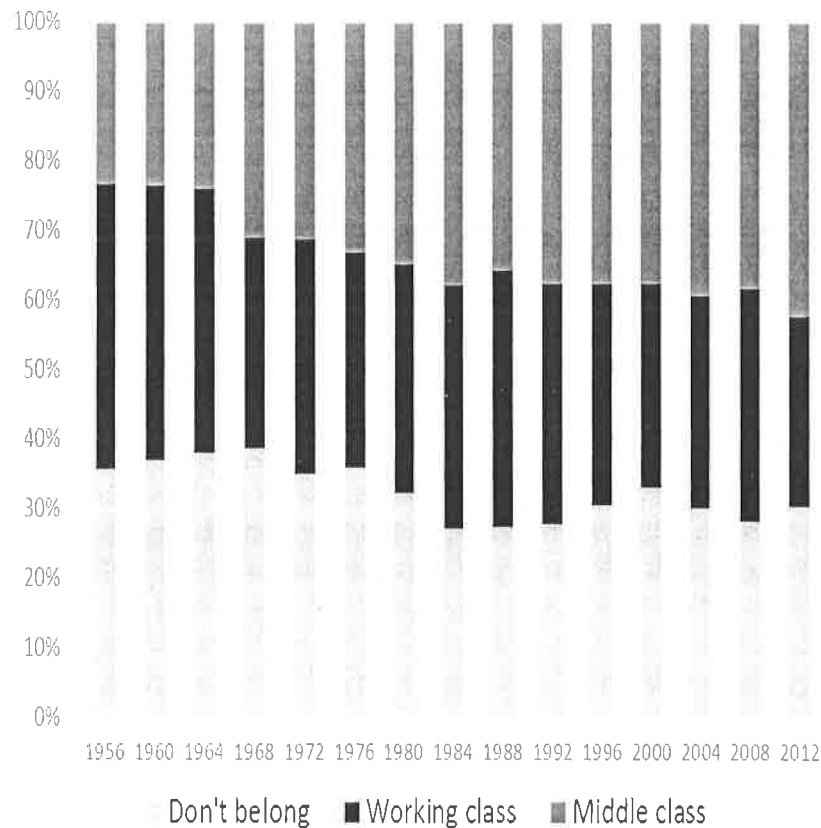
views are restricted to people who self-identify as eligible voters. Respondents were asked a two-part question. First: “Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging in one of these classes?” If the respondent said no, that was the end of it. But otherwise the interviewer followed up: “Well, if you had to make a choice, would you call yourself middle class or working class?”

**Figure 1** shows the percentages of respondents who responded that (1) they don't think of themselves in these terms, (2) they would call themselves working class, or (3) they would call themselves middle class. In the 1950s and early 1960s, when manufacturing employment was strong, more people thought of themselves as working class than middle class. Over time, the working-class share has declined and the middle-class share has increased. Still, in the 2012 round, 29 percent chose working class. Five out of six of them did not have a bachelor's degree.

### Changes in the Working Class

A generation or two ago, working class men supported their families by taking the industrial jobs that were plentiful. Today's working class, in contrast, competes for the diminishing share of blue-collar jobs that haven't yet been automated or outsourced. The transformation of the labor market has diminished the earnings prospect of young men. Between 1979 and 2007, according to a report by economists David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, wages declined for all 25-to-39-year-old men without college degrees. For women, wages declined for those without high-school degrees but rose for all other categories (Autor & Wasserman, 2013). Young men have been hit harder by the transformation of the labor market because they tended to cluster in the declining industrial sector.

**Figure 1.** Responses to this question: “There’s been some talk these days about different social classes. Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging in one of these classes? (IF YES:) Which one?” (Source: American National Election Surveys, 1956-2012. Machine-readable files, Survey Documentation and Analysis Archive, University of California at Berkeley).

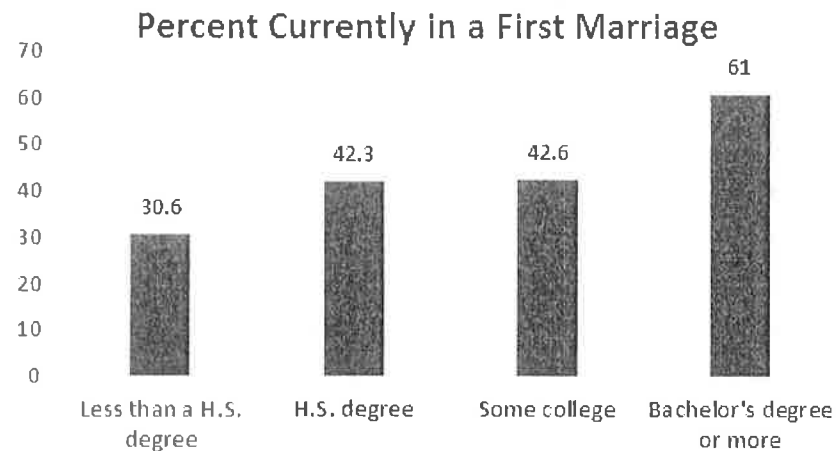


During the same period, a sharp gradient has emerged in the percentage of adults who are currently married, according to their educational attainment. **Figure 2** shows the differential in 2010 for a group of Americans (the participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 cohort) who were age 46 to 54. College graduates were twice as likely as those without high-school degrees to be married, with high-school graduates about half-way between. This gap is much larger than a half century ago, when marriage was widespread among the least- and most-educated middle-aged adults alike.

These changes in the labor market and in marriage are related. Indeed, social class differences in marriage have been tied to the extent of income inequality among white Americans for at least 130 years. Census records, which have been compiled into the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series by demographers at the University of Minnesota, tell us that the current era is not the first time that the nation has experienced a large marriage gap; rather, it is the second time. The first instance occurred in the late nineteenth century. What these two eras have in common, according to economists Claudia Goldin, Lawrence Katz, and Robert Margo, is that economic inequality was high and rising during both of them (Goldin & Katz, 2008; Katz & Margo, 2013).

The first marriage gap occurred between 1880 and 1910, during a period that Mark Twain labeled the Gilded Age. The growing industrial economy increased the number of managers and executives. A white-collar professional class solidified its gains in the labor market and married in large numbers. At the same time, the fortunes of independent craftsmen and artisans declined in the manufacturing industry as their small shops were replaced by large factories. Master craftsmen of all kinds – coppersmiths, cabinetmakers, watchmakers – either went out of business or hired more workers, produced larger quantities of goods, and turned into

**Figure 2.** Percent Currently in a First Marriage, Adults Ages 46 to 54 in 2010. (Source: Aughinbaugh, Robles, & Sun, 2013).



factory managers. Younger men who would have found positions as skilled apprentices and journeymen instead became low-paid industrial or service workers, and their marriage rates were modest.

In the past few decades, a period that some are calling the New Gilded Age, inequality has been high and rising again. Workers with bachelor's degrees have increased their earnings faster than those with less education. The middle of the labor market has hollowed out due to technological change. The offshoring of production has closed factory after factory. At the bottom low-skilled service work has expanded, while at the top an elite has captured an increasing share of all income gains.

During both Gilded Ages, young men with moderate skills have had a hard time finding the kinds of occupations that could support marriages. In the 1880s and 1890s their difficulties reflected the demise of artisanal and crafts work. In the current era, their troubles reflect the demise of factory work. This is not to say that cultural change has been irrelevant. Single men and women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries rarely lived together without marrying; and relatively few had children. They were much more likely to live with their parents or to be lodging in the homes of other families until they married. The social norms against cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage were too strong.

But over the past few generations, these norms have weakened. It is now commonplace for unmarried young adults to cohabit and broadly acceptable for them to have children. Unlike their ancestors in the late-1800s, many of today's working-class young adults have responded to the difficulty of marrying by living with a partner and having children outside of marriage.

### **Family Instability and Complexity**

The consequence of the growth of childbearing outside of marriage is a high level of family instability and complexity. A few decades ago, this instability was largely limited to those with the least education. Now it is common among the moderately-educated. Research has clearly shown that the probability of having a nonmarital birth is negatively related to education (Smock & Greenland, 2010). In this regard, most attention has been directed toward parents without high school degrees, who have had relatively high rates of nonmarital births for several decades. But in recent years, nonmarital births within cohabiting unions have increased rapidly among moderately educated parents. For instance, Manning (2013) reported that high-school educated adults have experienced the largest increases in cohabitation in recent decades; and several studies have shown that the percentage of births that occur within cohabiting unions has risen sharply and that this rise has been concentrated among those with less than a 4-year college education (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Lichter, 2012; Payne, Manning, & Brown, 2012).

It appears that a majority of the children of high-school graduates will be born outside of marriage – many into brittle cohabiting unions that rarely last more than a few years. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 Cohort, provides the most recent source of detailed information. By 2011, the survey respondents were age 26 to 31. Among parents without a bachelor's degree, 63 percent of births had occurred outside of marriage, 29% of them to cohabiting mothers and 34% of them to mothers not in unions (Cherlin, Talbert, & Yasutake, 2014). College graduates, in contrast, are much more likely to have children within marriages – more than 90% still do so (Cherlin, 2010).

We know that early nonmarital childbearing is associated with union dissolution because of the high break-up rates among unmarried parents in the first several years after a birth (McLanahan, 2011). We know that it is also associated with multipartnered fertility (the demographic term for having children with more than one partner), as parents form new romantic relationships and have children within them. In the Fragile Families sample of urban parents, who were first interviewed at the time of their child's birth, at least one parent said they had previously had a child with another partner in 36 percent of the cases (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). According to a recent estimate, about 13 percent of men in their forties and about 19 percent of women in their forties have had children with more than one partner. But this includes all adults -- including people who have had no children or just one child. When one only considers people who have had two or more children, about 23 percent of men aged 40 to 44 and 28 percent of women aged 41 to 49 have had children with more than one partner (Guzzo, 2014). Early nonmarital childbearing is therefore associated with family complexity – the accumulation of stepsiblings and half-siblings in the household and the ties to parents and children living in other households. These fertility patterns may be a primary way in which family inequality by social class is being reproduced.

The multipartnered fertility that we see among the less-educated gives rise to complex and ambiguous household relationships and kinship networks. Parents may have children living elsewhere due to marriages that ended in divorce or to informal partnerships that were brief. Ex-girlfriends and boyfriends may still be in the picture in ways that complicate a current relationship. Children growing up in the same household may have different sets of parents. To be sure, even middle-class American family ties are frequently altered by divorce and remarriage today; but multipartnered fertility, especially when much of it occurs outside of marriage, creates

even more uncertain, tenuous, and varying linkages among parents and children. It is a major new phenomenon among the moderately-educated middle of the population.

### Owing Less and Less to More and More

Vern Bengtson and his colleagues once characterized intergenerational kinship in the United States using the metaphor of the “beanpole family:” “a family structure in which the shape is long and thin, with more family generations alive but with fewer members in each generation” (Bengtson, 2001). This was always an oversimplification, as Bengtson would acknowledge, but it suggested clear lines of kinship and responsibility, with a focus on strong vertical ties among older parents, their adult children, and their grandchildren. Those lines were unproblematic a half-century ago. Then divorce and remarriage complicated them. Now multi-partnered fertility is further blurring them. In complex families, it is no longer clear to whom, and from whom, assistance flows. As the adults in these families enter their older years, we will see how and whether assistance flows up and down the generational lines.

The basic problem is that complex patterns of childbearing, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce are creating family networks in which there are more and more people whom one may count as kin but in which one owes less and less to each of them (Ganong & Coleman, 1999). With few exceptions (most notably the mother-child bond) lasting kin relationships depend not on biological or legal ties but rather on the work that one does in forging and maintaining them (or, conversely, letting them lapse). One does the work of kinship by providing assistance to family members in another household – or one does little and the relationship withers. Lines of assistance and obligation are ambiguous and depend on continuing contact and exchange.

Under this situation, it is unclear who will lend assistance to an older person or an adult child who is in need of it. The problem is greater for older men than for older women because the former tend to have weaker ties to children from past relationships. They also may not have a partner who feels obligated to help them. Katherine Newman, in her ethnographic study of older low-income adults writes of men who, in their fifties or sixties and in poor health with nowhere to go, show up at the doorsteps of ex-girlfriends or wives and ask to be taken in (Newman, 2003).

More generally, these new family forms open up a research agenda about exchange and assistance across the generations. For example:

- Will the demands for older people to support their kin be greater because of the potentially larger network of kin that older people will experience, or will the demands be smaller because the obligations to kin from previous marriages and relationships will be seen as low? Under what conditions, for instance, can an adult stepchild expect assistance with a down payment for a home from a stepparent?
- How will complex family ties affect the relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren? Can an older man who has had only intermittent contacts with a son born outside of marriage activate his ties when a grandchild is born? Can the son ask him to be an active grandparent? How will diffused ties to the many potential grandparents be experienced by older adults and their biological- and step-grandchildren?
- Will the potential for conflict and ambivalence in intergenerational relations increase because of past histories of acrimonious divorces, perceived abandonment, custody dis-



putes, and the like? Or will relationships in these cases lose emotional intensity and fade to indifference and irregular contact?

### Which Way Does the Scale Tip?

Perhaps the most important question from a policy perspective is this one: If and when older people reach a life stage where they need assistance, how will the flow of assistance from kin compare to what was typical a generation or two ago? Is there, on balance, an erosion of support or an augmentation of support as a result of divorce, remarriage, and complex, multipartnered fertility families? Do the modest contributions from a larger number of kin add up to as much assistance as people used to give and receive from a smaller number of kin in a stable marriage-based family network? Or does the broadening of kinship lead to such a dilution of responsibility and exchange that there is less total assistance? And if the latter is true, what happens to the elderly who find themselves with lots of quasi-kin but no close kin? How can we identify them? How do they subsist? How can we help them to receive assistance when they are in need?

We know very little about the lives of older Americans who are experiencing these new family forms (Agree & Glaser, 2009). It is, moreover, a difficult problem to study. Researchers would need to trace complicated networks and assess flows of assistance over time. We might need extensions of our theoretical models in order to define the problem sensibly. Real data might be so difficult to collect comprehensively that levels of assistance might need to be studied by simulation experiments.

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More generally, our long-time assumptions about how to think about intergenerational exchange and support are increasingly being thrown into question. Even more than in the 1980s and 1990s, we now must cast aside assumptions based on the stable nuclear family model. Yet it is still the case that older adults provide substantial assistance to their children and grandchildren, and that family and kin provide most of the care of older adults who have serious health limitations. Due to the imminent aging of the baby boomers, we need this type of care to continue. Determining whether, and under what circumstance, it is likely to continue, and designing ways to encourage and support it is a major challenge for everyone who is concerned about the well-being of older Americans in the twenty-first century.

### Social Class Divergence

Finally, the changes in family patterns that have occurred among the moderately educated over the past few decades may further widen a growing social class gap within the older population. We know that the gap is already substantial. Better-educated older Americans are more likely to have assets, retirement savings, and pensions than are the less-educated. For instance, among household heads age 65 and over, those with some college or more have five times the net worth of those without a high-school diploma (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2012). These social class differences are consistent with the substantial income and wealth inequalities among adults of all ages.

But the patterns of nonmarital childbearing, family instability, and family complexity that I have discussed in this policy brief may expand the social class divergence within the older population in new directions. Instability and complexity are today much more common among middle-aged Americans who lack a bachelor's

degree. The greatest increases in recent decades, as I have noted, have occurred among the moderately educated – the group we used to call the working class. In contrast, the middle-aged members of the college-educated middle class are more likely to have stable family lives with much less complex kinship patterns. Over the next few decades, as these Americans will age into the older population, they will bring with them very different histories of family and kinship according to whether or not a person will have attained a bachelor's degree earlier in life.

Consequently we may see growing social class inequalities among the older population in whether they can obtain assistance from their kin when they need it and whether they will provide assistance to their middle-aged kin if requested to do so. Among the college-educated older population, a higher proportion of intergenerational ties will have arisen from stable marital ties and will reflect biological children with whom the older parent lived continuously. Fewer intergenerational ties will have been weakened by divorce. In contrast, among the non-college-educated older population, a higher proportion of intergenerational ties will reflect unstable cohabiting and marital ties, stepparent-stepchild relationships, and complex mixtures of half-siblings, and stepsiblings, and biological siblings. Intergenerational ties may be weakened more often by short periods of co-residence with children. In short, we may see sharp social class variations to the extent that life histories of the older population reflect family instability and complexity.

If family instability and complexity impede intergenerational assistance, we may see growing social class inequalities of care, obligation, and intergenerational assistance within the older population. These new inequalities would be layered on top of the economic inequalities that we see today. The result would be to further drive apart the older population, which already experiences the substantial material inequality that we see today.

Of course, all this is speculative. Perhaps over the next generation Americans will learn how to manage intergenerational support in a context of complex family lives. New norms may encourage older stepparents and middle-aged stepchildren to feel more obligation and commitment toward one another – just as the members of successful stepfamilies do today. Fathers may spend more time with children from previous marriages and relationships than they do today, thus creating bonds that can last until the fathers reach old age. Put another way, we may learn how to institutionalize complex family ties in ways that preserve sufficient obligation and commitment. If so, we could minimize the difficulties that complex families face today and lessen the social class differences that the older population may face. But if we cannot find ways to cope with the consequences of family instability and complexity, we will create a new layer of social difference among the older population that will pose challenges for intergenerational relations and the provision of care.

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