Social Forces that Imperil the Family[1]

Tim B. Heaton

IS THERE CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Since mid-century, dramatic changes in family demographics have characterized patterns of parenthood and sexual partnerships in America. As age at marriage has increased, the age at initiation of sexual intercourse has decreased so that adolescents and young adults are spending several years sexually experienced but not married. Cohabitation is becoming a common experience during this stage of their lives. The age at which people start having children has not changed as much as has age at marriage so that an increasing proportion of children are born to single parents. At the same time, marriages have become much less stable so that adults are spending more time single after marriage, and children are more likely to live at least part of their lives with a single parent. The conjunction of sexual intimacy, parenthood, and legal commitment that characterized families in the 1950s is not now nearly so obvious.[2]

Economic changes have compounded the process of family change. A period of sustained economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s created widespread expectations that people's standard of living would improve from year to year and that children would be better off when they started their families than their parents had been. The American dream of a house, car, and some modern appliances became a reality for larger

2. Andrew J. Cherlin, ed., *The Changing American Family and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1988); David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1988); Tim B. Heaton, "Family Decline and Disassociation: Changing Family Demographics Since the 1950s," *Family Perspective* 27, no. 2 (1993): 127–146; Bruce A. Chadwick and Tim B. Heaton, eds., *Statistical Handbook on the American Family* (Phoenix: The Oryx Press, 1999).

segments of the population. In the mid-1970s, the economic trend leveled off. But expectations continued to remain high. Many couples found that the simplest way to keep up with expectations was for the wife to go to work. Women entered the labor force in record numbers. Indeed, the greatest percentage increase in employment was among mothers of preschool children. Of course, a number of poor women, often single mothers and minorities, has always worked out of economic necessity. The end result of these trends is that the model of a stay-at-home mom and a working dad no longer fits a majority of families. Economic restructuring combined with increases in both single parent families and dual earning couples also created a widening gap between rich and poor.[3]

Ideological movements further challenged beliefs regarding family life.[4] The sexual revolution destroyed the norm of restricting sexual expression to marriage. The feminist movement questioned the homemaker model for women. Greater emphasis was placed on self-fulfillment while promotion of diversity challenged the notion that one type of family is good for everyone. The gay rights movement rejected the widespread belief that homosexual behavior is immoral. In combination, demographic, economic, and ideological changes have created a vastly different context within which people make decisions about becoming sexual partners and parents. This shift is illustrated by the movie *Pleasantville*, where a stereotypical 1950s family is portrayed as sterile and restrictive of individual growth.

Given the widespread changes that have occurred, the deterioration of the family can be blamed for a variety of social ills from school shootings, to drug use, to rising welfare rolls, to abuse. Indeed, you can blame any bad thing you want on the family, cite the above noted trends, and some people will agree. Despite these popular perceptions, the influence of "family decline" on the quality of children's lives is debated by family scholars.[5] In this paper, I first review responses to these trends by LDS scholars. Then I examine trends in several aspects of family behaviors and attitudes, comparing the U.S. and Mormons, and briefly assess their impact on the quality of family life. I conclude that the response by LDS scholars may have focused rather narrowly on a few issues and neglected other issues that have a greater impact on families.

---

3. Reynolds Farley, *The New American Reality* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996); Urie Bronfenbrenner, Peter McClelland, Elaine Wethington, Phyllis Moen, and Stephen J. Ceci, *The State of Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

4. David Popenoe, "American Family Decline, 1960-1990: A Review and Appraisal," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55, no. 3 (1993): 527–542.

5. Sharon K. Houseknect and Jaya Sastry, "Family 'Decline' and Child Well-Being: A Comparative Assessment," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58, no. 3 (1996): 726–739.

THE RESPONSE

Changes in the nature of family life have generated a variety of responses. Some of these responses seem to be motivated by self-interest or political agendas. Opportunistic politicians try to get votes by talking about family values. Once in office, they hotly debate the extent to which government should try to influence different aspects of family life. The entertainment industry changes its depiction of family life and sexual behavior. Some extreme feminists say "good riddance" to the family.[6] Religious leaders reconsider policies about the roles of women and homosexuals. Scholars refer to such changes to obtain research funds and get published.

A variety of responses from prominent Mormons is presented in the book *Charting a New Millennium*.[7] Richard G. Wilkins,[8] a law professor at Brigham Young University, is concerned with the feminist agenda evident at international conferences. He says that core elements of this agenda are support for same-sex marriages, a pro-choice position on abortion, and government support for child care, so women can pursue careers. He has spoken out against this agenda in several speeches, has established NGO Family Voice to speak up for traditional family values including heterosexual marriage, mothers staying at home to care for children, and pro-life policies. BYU is now co-sponsoring World Congresses on the Family which support his views.

Camille Williams,[9] a graduate of BYU's law school and part-time faculty member, is concerned with a legal trend that favors the rights of individuals over family stability. This trend includes liberalization of divorce, non-enforcement of laws prohibiting some types of sexual behavior, and protection of homosexuals. Corresponding with these legal changes are ideological changes favoring self-fulfillment at the expense of family commitment.

Kathleen Bahr,[10] a professor of family science at BYU, and Cheri Anderson Loveless, author and Young Mother of the Year in 1983, are

---

6. Judith Stacey, "Good Riddance to 'The Family': A Response to David Popenoe," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55, no. 3 (1993): 545–547.

7. Maurine and Scot Proctor, eds., *Charting a New Millennium* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1998).

8. Richard G. Wilkins, "The United Nations, Traditional Family Values, and the 'Istanbul Miracle,'" in Maurine and Scot Proctor, eds., *Charting a New Millennium* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1998), 123–144.

9. Camille S. Williams, "The Family, the Law, and the New Millennium," in Maurine and Scot Proctor, eds., *Charting a New Millennium* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1998), 147–171.

10. Kathleen Slaugh Bahr and Cheri A. Loveless, "Family Work—in the 21st Century," in Maurine and Scot Proctor, eds., *Charting a New Millennium* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1998), 173–204.

concerned that family work is seen as a burden to get out of the way rather than as a means to positive family interaction. They believe the concern with efficient dispatch of household tasks, so people can pursue leisure has supplanted God's plan that families work together. Not surprisingly, since the authors have BYU ties, their arguments are generally consistent with a conservative position that families are changing for the worse and that we need to look back in time for better models.

The Proclamation on the Family issued in 1995 is an official church statement reflecting concern with family trends. The proclamation covers many topics. It contains unequivocal support for elements of the above noted agenda including opposition to same-sex marriage, restriction of sexual activity to married couples, support for distinct gender roles with father as provider and mother as nurturer, and reaffirmation of the importance of marriage and childbearing. Although the Proclamation does not explicitly refer to abortion, it does affirm the sanctity of life. The church's position opposing abortion except in the cases of rape and endangerment of the mother's life is well known. The above noted authors take positions consistent with and often drawing from the Proclamation. Careful reading of the Proclamation also lends support to issues that are often seen as part of a liberal agenda. These issues include abuse, gender inequality—husbands and wives are supposed to be equal partners even though they have different roles—and poverty—families are to provide for the physical needs of their children.

When asked about trends that pose a serious threat to the family, Mormon professionals give a variety of responses. I interviewed an LDS pediatrician from Houston, Texas, who is concerned that more of children's leisure time is spent in front of the TV and less of it is spent reading or interacting with other family members. He is also concerned about the number of preschool children who spend long periods of time each day under the care of someone who does not give them love and affection. A former researcher for IBM who recently joined the faculty at BYU is concerned that we are getting too rich and materialistic. Our wealth creates greater concern with consumption than with quality family life. An historical economist is especially concerned about the growth of single-parent families. A social worker who has worked with abused children has observed many problems arising from parental abuse of drugs and alcohol. In short, there is a wide variety of views about trends that threaten the family.

STATISTICAL TRENDS

Obviously, the two major threats to good families are poor parenting and poor partnering. Taking an empirical approach, I present trends for which quantifiable information is available. Available statistical trends

reflect the combination of (1) interest by policy makers and scholars, (2) the establishment of agencies and funding to collect information, and (3) the process of preparing and releasing this information. Unfortunately, these processes neglect several important trends affecting the family.

Several national social surveys include information on religious affiliation, making it possible to compare self-identified Mormons with the national population. Caution should be exercised, however, in using these data. Even though a sample is statistically representative of the nation, such may not be the case for the LDS sub-sample. In the first place, the number of Mormons is generally small. Moreover, some of the samples have multiple stages. In the first stage, geographic areas are selected. If areas in Utah are selected, then the number of Mormons is comparatively large, but overly representative of Utah Mormons. If Utah is not selected, the number of Mormons is comparatively small but overly representative of non-Utah Mormons.

Declining Marriage: In a recent presidential address to the Population Association of America, the major organization for demographers in the Americas, Linda Waite[11] outlined several benefits that are derived from marriage. These benefits include fewer alcohol related problems, less risk taking, better health, more frequent and satisfying sex, more wealth, lower school dropout rates and poverty among children, and higher wages. This list indicates that marriage has a broad range of benefits for partners and their children. Having a partner to give support and encouragement, to share household and parental responsibilities, and to spend leisure time with can enhance many aspects of our lives. Waite recommends that family scholars have a responsibility to inform the public about the benefits of marriage and to promote policies that increase the likelihood of marriage.

Given this litany of benefits, declining rates of marriage should be high on our list of threats to the family. Marriage rates have declined substantially in the last several decades, even to the point that some authors have referred to the "retreat from marriage."[12] Results from two recent national surveys demonstrate this trend (see Table 1). The General Social Survey (GSS) has interviewed about 1,500 adults on an annual or biannual schedule since 1972. The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) interviewed over 10,000 women aged 15-44 in 1995. According to the NSFG, the percentage of women who are still single by their 26th birthday has nearly doubled from around 30 percent for women born in the 1950s, to almost 60 percent for women born in the 1970s. If this trend continues, a substantial percentage of the population will never marry.

---

11. Linda J. Waite, "Does Marriage Matter?," *Demography* 32, no. 4 (1995): 483–507.

12. Robert Schoen, "The continuing retreat from marriage: figures from 1983 U.S. marital status life tables." *Sociology and Social Research*, 71, no. 2 (Jan 1987): 108–9.

TABLE 1.
Trends In Marriage by LDS Membership

|		Percent ever married by given age			
		1995 National Survey of Family Growth		1972-1998 General Social Survey	
Year Born		LDS	National	LDS	National
Before 1940	Age 18	—	—	13.3	9.6
	22	—	—	56.2	48.4
	26	—	—	82.0	75.4
	30	—	—	93.0	86.7
(N)		—	—	(128)	(11886)
1940-1949	18	—	—	12.8	8.8
	22	—	—	61.6	51.4
	26	—	—	92.6	76.3
	30	—	—	96.3	84.6
(N)		—	—	(86)	(5927)
1950-1959	18	27.7	11.0	6.7	7.6
	22	69.9	47.5	50.5	42.6
	26	90.4	68.3	82.4	63.4
	30	95.2	79.0	86.5	73.3
(N)		(83)	(3792)	(88)	(4605)
1960-1969*	18	7.3	7.0	4.5	3.4
	22	51.2	34.9	38.0	21.1
	26	72.0	59.2	81.8	37.0
	30	84.3	72.8	81.8	44.8
(N)		(82)	(3831)	(88)	(4605)
1970-1979	18	4.6	3.9	—	—
	22	33.9	26.7	—	—
	26	66.0	42.1	—	—
	30	—	—	—	—
(N)		(81)	(2967)	—	—

*1960–1979 for the General Social Survey

Marriage rates are higher among the LDS population. About forty percent of LDS women were still single by their 26th birthday. The trend in declining marriage among the LDS population is clearly following the national trend, but two surveys suggest somewhat different results. In the NSFG, the LDS pattern of marriage parallels the national pattern for each cohort. In the GSS, however, the gap between the Mormon population and the nation increases over time because the decline in marriage is lower for the LDS population. Whether or not the LDS/national gap is widening, the difference implies that LDS members are benefitting from their emphasis on marriage.

But are these marriages happy? One might think that as divorce has

become more acceptable, then those who remain married are happier. Such is not the case. A plot of trends in marital happiness since 1972 based on the GSS (see Figure 1) indicates, if anything, that marital satisfaction has declined a little. With all of the emphasis on improving sex, making your partner happy, and improving your marriage, little has changed. There is, however, a bright note for LDS members, where the recent trend in satisfaction is upward.

Marital Instability: A dramatic rise in divorce and marital separation is one of the most often noted indicators that the family is in decline. Increasing marital disruption is assumed to reflect lower commitment to long term relationships and greater emphasis on individual fulfillment. Marital disruption can have serious consequences for those involved. As noted above, simply not having a partner can be detrimental. In addition, the trauma of disruption can be harmful to partners and children. Of course, some scholars note that children may be better off with a single parent than in a conflictual relationship.[13]
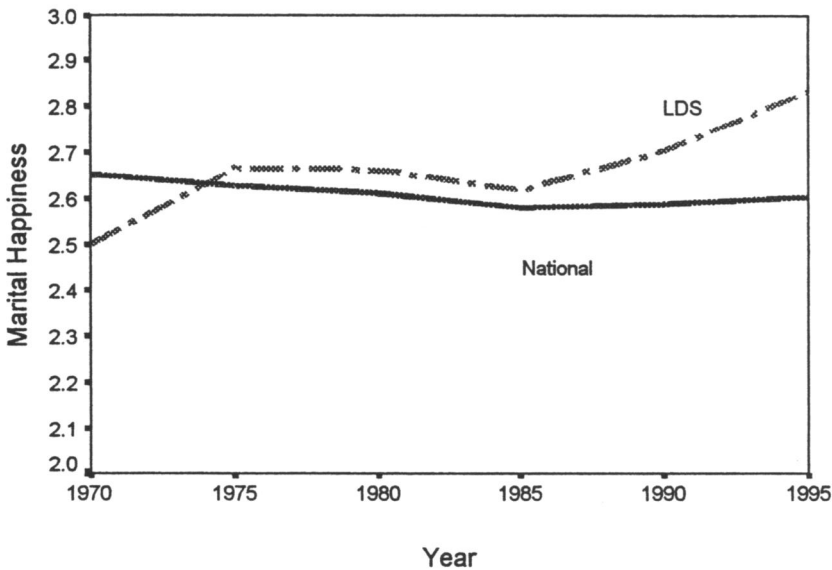
Based on a 3-point scale with 3 being "very happy"

FIGURE 1. Trend in Marital Happiness, GSS

---

13. Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Andrew J. Cherlin, *Divided Families* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Here there is good news. After rising for several decades, the national divorce rate has reversed and is now declining. The decline is not steep, so it would take several decades to reach the low divorce rates of the 1950s, but the decline is not trivial.[14] Data for Mormons from both the NSFG and GSS suggest that the decline in LDS divorce may be even greater than the national average (see Figure 2). Research in the 1980s concluded that LDS divorce rates were not much different than the national average,[15] but this conclusion needs to be reexamined in the 1990s.

Ironically, one of the reasons for the decline in divorce is the decline in marriage. This is not simply because there are fewer people at risk of divorce. Rather, as people delay marriage to a more mature age, their marriages tend to become more stable. Rising levels of female education are also favorable to marital stability.

Same-sex Relationships: As noted above, the legitimization of same-sex relationships has been viewed by some as a major threat to the family. I have yet to see compelling evidence for this claim. In the first place, only a small minority of the population has ever been involved in a same sex relationship. According to the GSS, less than six percent of adults say they have had a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex since they were 18 years old (5.5% of men and 4.5% of women). This percentage has been quite stable since 1989 (see Figure 3). The percentage for LDS women is 3.4%, somewhat lower than the national rate. Of the 60 LDS men responding to the GSS since 1989, not one said he had had a same-sex relationship. Although this result is not statistically different from the national percentage of 5.5, it does raise room for speculation. Are LDS gay men leaving the church at a high rate, are they unwilling to report their experience in national surveys, or is this just a statistical fluke? More research is needed to understand the experiences of Mormons who are attracted to partners of the same sex.

Legitimization of same-sex relationships clearly challenges the belief that sexual intimacy should only be expressed in heterosexual relationships. Beyond this challenge to sexual norms, it is not clear how legitimization would undermine the family structure of society. Research indicates that some gay men do not adhere to the ideal of monogamy.[16] One argument for legitimizing same-sex relationships is to promote stability. In short, the costs and benefits to legalizing or in other ways legit-

---

14. Tim B. Heaton, "Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States," Presented at the Conference on the National Survey of Family Growth, Washington D.C., 1998.

15. Tim B. Heaton, "Demographics of the Contemporary Mormon Family," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 3 (1992): 19.

16. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1983).

Percent of the Married Population Who Have Ever Divorced, GSS

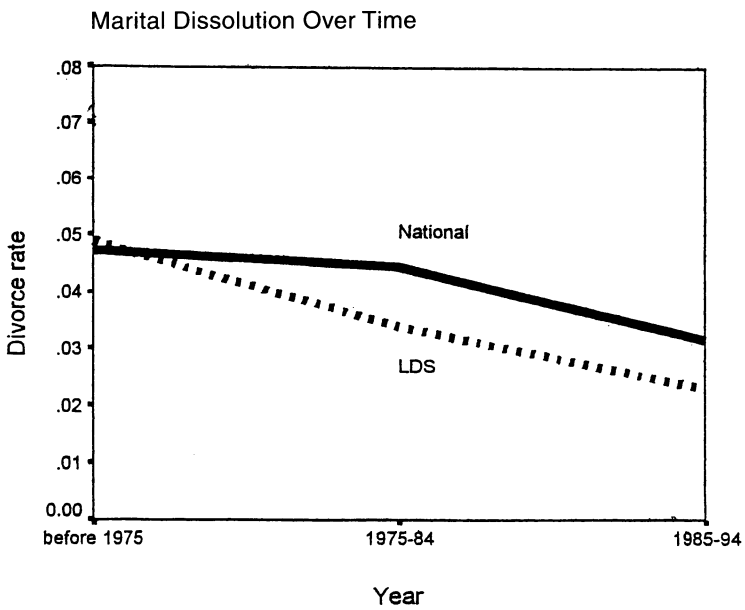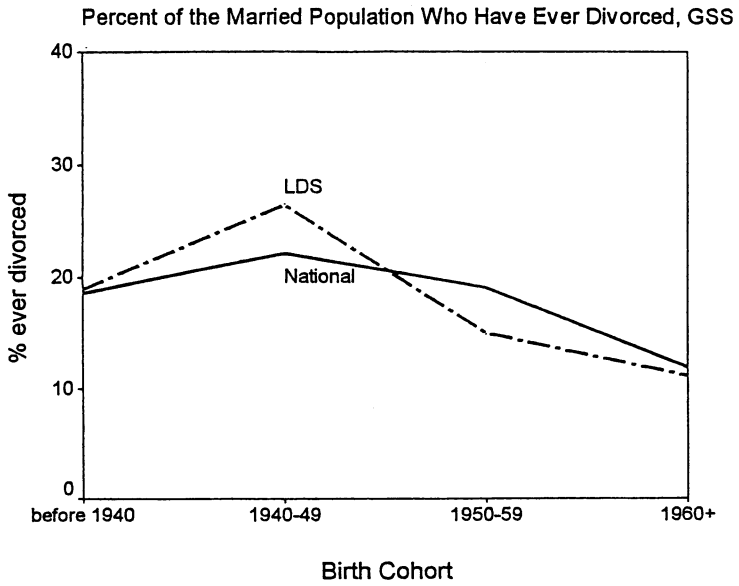## Marital Dissolution Over Time

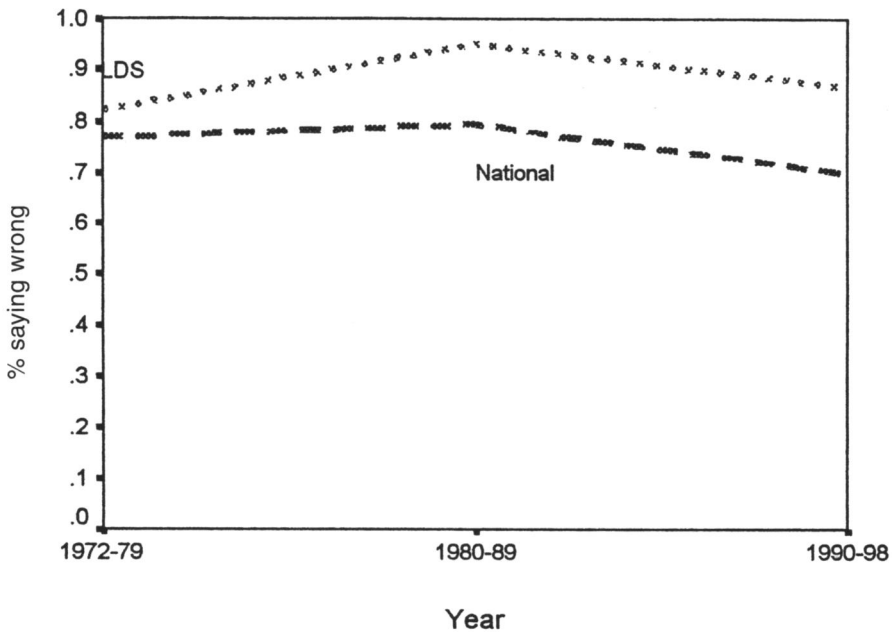FIGURE 2. Trend in Marital Dissolution for Mormons and the Nation, GSS

FIGURE 3. Percent Saying Homosexual Relationships are Always or Almost Always Wrong, GSS

imizing same-sex relationships have not been empirically demonstrated. Given this lack of clear evidence and the small percentage of the population involved, I would not place same-sex relationships on the list of major threats to family life.

Abuse: In 1996, over two million cases of child abuse and neglect were reported and investigated, and nearly one million cases were substantiated.[17] About half of these cases were for neglect, a fourth for physical abuse, 12 percent for sexual abuse, and less than ten percent involved emotional maltreatment or medical neglect. There are numerous consequences of abuse for spouses and children. Beyond immediate spousal physical damage, spousal abuse is associated with lower self-esteem,[18] depression,[19] and post-traumatic distress disorder.[20] Consequences

---

17. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, 118th edition (Washington, D.C., 1998).

18. M. Cascardi, and K. D. O'Leary, "Depressive Symptomatology, Self-esteem, and Self-blame in Battered Women," *Journal of Family Violence* 7 (1992): 249–259.

19. B. Andrews, "Bodily Shame as a Mediator Between Abusive Experiences and Depression," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 104 (1995): 277–285.

20. W. J. Gleason, "Mental Disorders in Battered Women: An Empirical Study," *Violence and Victims* 8 (1993): 53–66.

of abuse for children may be even more dramatic and of longer duration. One recent study shows that children who have sexual contact with adults are more likely to begin voluntary intercourse before age 16, to have a child as a teenager, to contract a sexually transmitted infection, and to be sexually coerced in adolescence or adulthood.[21] Psychological consequences include low self-esteem, learning problems, social withdrawal, adolescent delinquency, and depression.[22]

Limited data suggest that sexual abuse is about as common for LDS members as is the case nationally. In the NSFG, 16 percent of LDS women said they had been forced to have sex compared with 20 percent nationally. Of the sexually experienced women in that survey, 7.9% of the Mormons and 6.6% of the total sample said their first sexual intercourse was involuntary. Respondents to the Preparation for Marriage Survey conducted by several universities around the country, including BYU, were asked, "At times sexual activities occur in families such as touching children in inappropriate places or performing sexual acts with children. Did these things ever happen to you while you grew up?" About 12 percent of the Mormons said yes. This percentage was a little lower for Catholics and Protestants, and a little higher for other religions and those with no religious preference.

Less is known about physical abuse of LDS children. LDS parents are a little more likely than others to report spanking or slapping children,[23] but this could be explained by the number and ages of children. Spanking is generally not considered to be abusive under most circumstances. Mormons are not very different in reports of marital violence as indicated by hitting or throwing something at a spouse and arguments that

---

21. Christopher R. Browning and Edward O. Laumann, "Sexual Contact Between Children and Adults: A Life Course Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 4 (1997): 540–560.

22. Victoria L. Banyard and Linda M. Williams, "Characteristics of Child Sexual Abuse as Correlates of Women's Adjustment: A Prospective Study," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58, no. 4 (1996): 853–865; H. P. Martin and P. Beezley, "Personality of abused children," in H. P. Martin, ed., *The Abused Child* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1976), 105–111; A. H. Green, "Child Abuse and the Etiology of Violent Delinquent Behavior," in R. J. Hunner and Y. E. Walker, eds., *Exploring the Relationship Between Child Abuse and Delinquency* (New Jersey: Allenheld and Schram, 1981), 152–160; C. C. Tower, *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999); C. T. Wang and D. Daro, *Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1997 Annual Fifty-State Survey* (Available from the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, 200 S. Michigan Avenue, 17th floor, Chicago, IL 60604).

23. Tim B. Heaton, Kristen L. Goodman, and Thomas B. Holman, "In Search of a Peculiar People: Are Mormon Families Really Different?," in Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young, eds., *Contemporary Mormonism Social Science Perspectives* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 87–117.

get physical,[24] suggesting that rates of physical abuse may be similar for Mormons and the national population.

Part of the reason abuse is of great concern is because the consequences are long lasting and affect other members of the family. Because abuse affects a fairly large segment of the population and can have very traumatic long-term consequences, I would place it high on the list of factors which detract from family well-being.

Poverty: Poverty is clearly a family issue. Forty percent of the poor population are children (defined as people under age 18). Children are more likely to be poor than any other age group, and the gap in poverty rates for children compared to all persons has increased since 1970. In 1970, children were 18 percent more likely to be poor than was the average person. By 1996 the gap increased to 45 percent.[25] Poverty has many negative consequences for children. Poverty increases infant mortality and the chance that babies will fall below the desirable birth-weight. Growing up in poverty increases the likelihood that children will not complete high school and that females will have a non-marital birth, thus, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.[26] Poverty has also been found to be correlated with anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and antisocial behavior of children.[27]

The GSS suggests that rates of poverty have increased among LDS church members as well (see Figure 4). The NSFH suggests that LDS poverty rates are comparable to the national average.

Poverty is an even greater concern when we consider the global picture. Eighty percent of the earth's population now lives in less-developed countries.[28] LDS membership is growing most rapidly in these less developed regions, especially Latin America. Poverty in less-developed countries implies lack of access to sufficient food, safe drinking water, basic health care, and literacy. These basics will be among the greatest concerns to a growing number of LDS families. Thus, providing "the basics of physical life and protection" is of growing concern to families in the church and the world at large.

Single-parent Families: In many ways, the consequences for children in single-parent families are the converse of those in two parent

---

24. Ibid.

25. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, 118th edition (Washington, D.C., 1998).

26. Greg J. Duncan, et. al, "How Much Does Childhood Poverty Affect the Life Chances of Children?," *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 3 (1998): 406–423.

27. Donald K. Routh, "Impact of Poverty on Children, Youth and Families," *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* (1994).

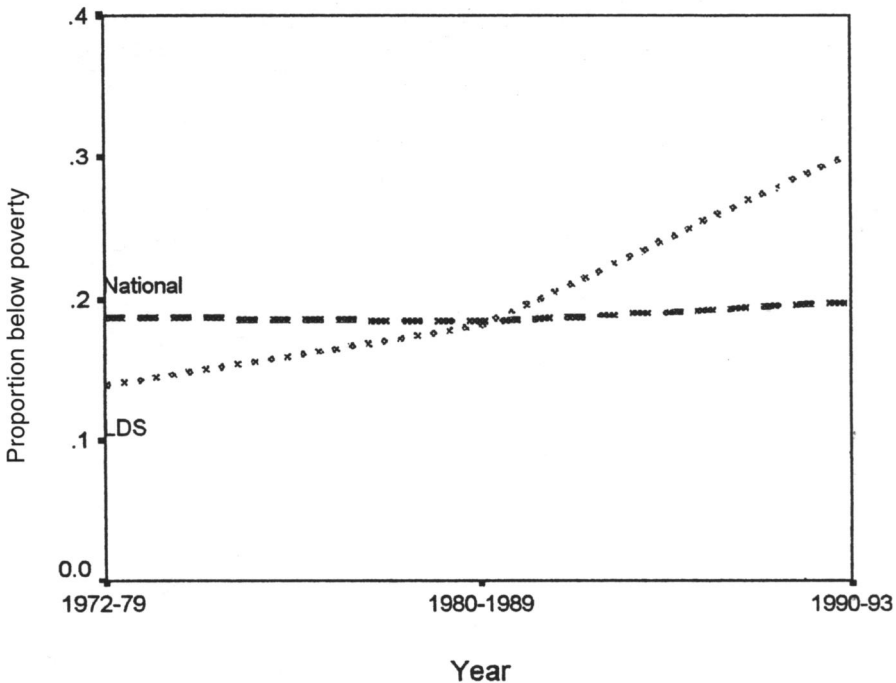28. Population Reference Bureau, 1999 *World Population Data Sheet* (Washington, D.C.).

FIGURE 4. Poverty Rates by Religion, GSS

families. Children with a single parent are more likely to be poor, to drop out of school, to become unwed parents, and to later divorce themselves. Although the consequences of poverty and having a single parent are interrelated, each risk factor has some independent effects on negative outcomes.[29] As with poverty and abuse, the consequences of growing up in a single parent family extend beyond a single generation.

In 1968, 85 percent of all families with children (under 18) included both parents. By 1997, this figure dropped to 68 percent.[30] An even smaller percentage of children, probably less than half, will spend all of their childhood in a two-parent family.[31]

---

29. Urie Bronfenbrenner, Peter McClelland, Elaine Wethington, Phyllis Moen, and Stephen J. Ceci, *The State of Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Susan Mayer, *What Money Can't Buy: The Effect of Parental Income on Children's Outcomes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

30. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998,* 118th edition (Washington, D.C., 1998).

31. Sara McLanahan and Larry Bumpass, "Intergenerational Consequences of Family Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 1 (July 1988): 130–52.

Given current demographics, single-parent families are generally created by premarital births and marital disruption. As noted above, rates of marital disruption are high, but have moderated somewhat in the last several years. In 1950, 4 percent of births were to unwed mothers. This figure has increased steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s. By 1995, the figure increased to 32.2%.[32] In other words, one in three children is born out of wedlock. But births to teenage mothers have remained fairly stable. The biggest factor contributing to unwed parenthood in recent decades is not that more teenagers are getting pregnant. Rather, people are deciding not to marry, as noted above. Thus, it is impossible to separate the increase in single-parent families from the retreat from marriage.

LDS households are more likely to include a married couple and children than is the case nationally, according to the GSS (see Figure 5). Among Mormons the ratio of single parent families to married couples with children is much lower than the national average. According to the general social survey, the national ratio increased from 1 single parent family for every 5 married couples with children in the 1970s, to nearly 1 for 2 in the 1990s. In comparison, the ratio for Mormons increased from 1 for 20 in the 1970s to 1 for 5 in the 1990s. In other words, LDS families are now about where U.S. families were in the 1970s. Single parent families are less common among Mormons largely because Mormons are more likely to be married when they begin having children. For example, in the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, 84% of Mormon children were born to a married couple compared with 60 percent nationally.

Family Roles: In 1960, 18.6 percent of married women with children under age 5 were employed. The percentage increased steadily until 1990 when it reached 62 percent. Since then it has remained fairly stable.[33] This shift signals a fundamental change in the role of women over the last half-century. Of course, women's economic roles went through an equally important shift because of industrialization. Most women contributed to the household economy before the industrial revolution, but this was not seen as a threat to the family because the household was often the location of production. There was not nearly so great a separation of economic and parental roles. It was only after the location of childcare and economic production were separated that women's roles as the caretakers of children became a critical issue.

LDS women are about as likely to work as is the case nationally according to the GSS (see Figure 6). Research suggests that LDS employment is higher among singles and lower among married women. Part-

---

32. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998,* 118th edition (Washington, D.C., 1998).
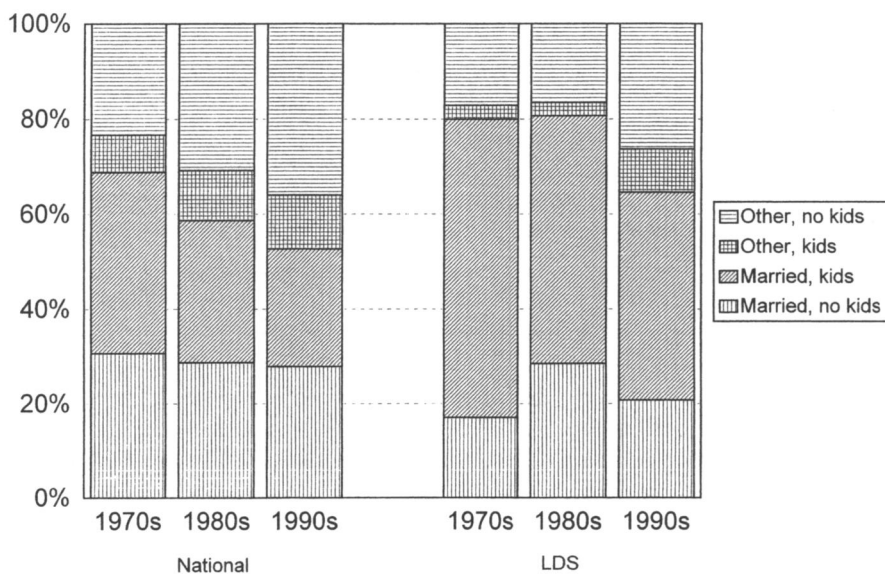
33. Ibid.

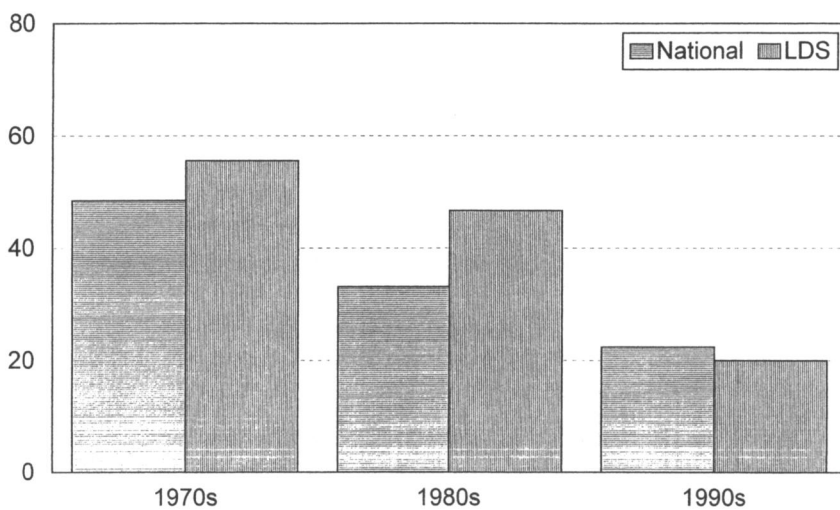FIGURE 5. Household Structure in National and LDS Families, GSS

FIGURE 6. Percent of Mothers Who Are Keeping House, GSS

time work is also higher among LDS women while full-time employment is lower.[34] Although members of the LDS church tend to be conservative in their attitudes regarding gender roles, they are similar to the national average in some important respects. In particular, Mormons are more likely to see a problem with working mothers, but are not more opposed to women working or getting involved in politics.[35]

Research on the impacts of mothers' employment on the well-being of children and marriage is complex. Consequences depend on factors such as the quality of child-care, age of the child, and support from other family members. Women with more economic resources find it easier to leave a marriage, but their income is also a stabilizing factor in low income families.[36] Children who are very young may suffer if they are placed into child-care, but older children may benefit from contact with other children.[37] The major consequence of maternal employment may be a reduction in time spent with children.[38] Overall, the evidence does not now support the conclusion that maternal employment poses a serious threat to the family.

Abortion: In 1995, an estimated 1.4 million abortions were performed in the United States. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that 46 million abortions are performed worldwide each year.[39] That is about one abortion for every three births both in the U.S. and worldwide. The abortion rate has dropped about 20 percent since the 1980s in the U.S. and there is some indication that it may be declining in other areas of the world.

In the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, women reported that 13.5 percent of their pregnancies ended in induced abortion. The comparable figure for Mormon women was 5.2 percent. Mormons are also more likely to be opposed to abortion than is the case nationally, except in

---

34. Tim B. Heaton, "Familial, Socioeconomic, and Religious Behavior: A Comparison of LDS and Non-LDS Women," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 2 (1994): 169–183.

35. "Peculiar People," *Sunstone* 20, no. 4 (1997) 108: 13.

36. Hiromi Ono, "Husbands' and Wives' Resources and Marital Dissolution," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60, no. 3 (1998): 674–689; Stacy J. Rogers, "Wives' Income and Marital Quality: Are There Reciprocal Effects?," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 1 (1999): 123–132.

37. Jay Belsky, "Parental and Nonparental Child Care and Children's Socioemotional Development: A Decade in Review," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52, no. 4 (1990): 885–903; Jay Belsky and David Eggebeen, "Early and Extensive Maternal Employment and Young Children's Socioemotional Development: Children of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, no. 4 (1991): 1083–1098.

38. Chandra Muller, "Maternal Employment, Parental Involvement, and Mathematics Achievement Among Adolescents," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57, no. 1 (1995): 85–100.

39. http://www.galwayforlife.ie/global_figures.html

cases of rape or endangerment of the mother's life which is consistent with the church's official position.[40]

The abortion issue is so politically charged that much more is written about its politics than about its consequences. Moreover, it is difficult to sort out the consequences of the abortion from the negative conditions that gave rise to the decision to abort. Abortion obviously deprives the fetus of life. To my knowledge, the LDS Church has not described the consequences for the spirits that may have been assigned to those fetuses, but abortion has been likened to murder. Possible consequences for the mother include post-abortion syndrome,[41] higher likelihood of abusing subsequent children,[42] and psychological distress.[43]

The high rate of abortion and the drastic consequences for the fetus imply that abortion should be of great concern. The lack of knowledge about the consequences for the mother and potential spirit leave some question about the severity of the problem.

Non-marital Sex: Perhaps no cultural change has had a greater impact on what we think of as family behavior than has the sexual revolution. According to the GSS, a majority of the U.S. population no longer thinks premarital sex is wrong (see Figure 7). Mormons are more likely to say premarital sex is wrong, but a substantial minority does not. Among respondents to the NSFG, about 80 percent of women are not virgins at their first wedding (see Figure 8). The norm of fidelity after marriage remains strong, however.[44]

Changes in sexual attitudes and behaviors have challenged the norm of premarital chastity. What is wrong with people having sex? Consensual sex is gratifying, has no victims, and hormones create strong sexual urges. Premarital births and sexually transmitted diseases are obvious concerns, but these can usually be resolved with proper contraception. Young adolescents may not yet be ready to make mature judgements about intimate relationships and may not contracept effectively, so maybe we should encourage some delay. The average age at first intercourse for women in the U.S. is about 18.

---

40. "Peculiar People," *Sunstone* 21, no. 1 (1998) 109: 17.

41. Peter Doherty, ed., *Post-Abortion Syndrome* (Cambridge: Four Corners Press, 1995).

42. Philip G. Ney, Tak Fung, and Adele Rose Wickett, "Relationship between induced abortion and child abuse and neglect: four studies, " in Peter Doherty, ed., *Post-abortion Syndrome* (Cambridge: Four Corners Press, 1995), 83–101.

43. Mary Parthun and Anne Kiss, *Abortion's Aftermath: Psychological Effects of Induced Abortion* (Ontario: Human Life Research Institute, 1987); Jamems L. Rogers, "Psychological Consequences of Abortion," in James K. Hoffmeier, ed., *Abortion* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), 177–193.

44. Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, and Gina Kolata, *Sex in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).
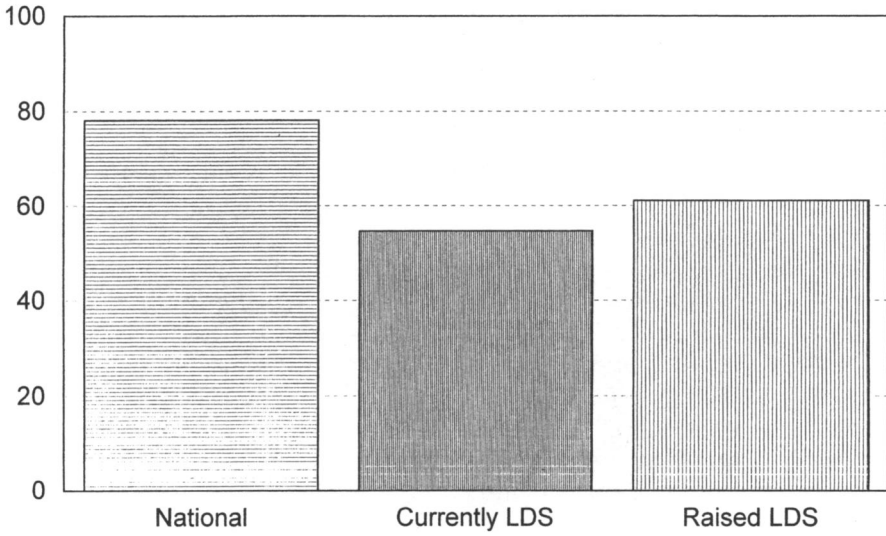
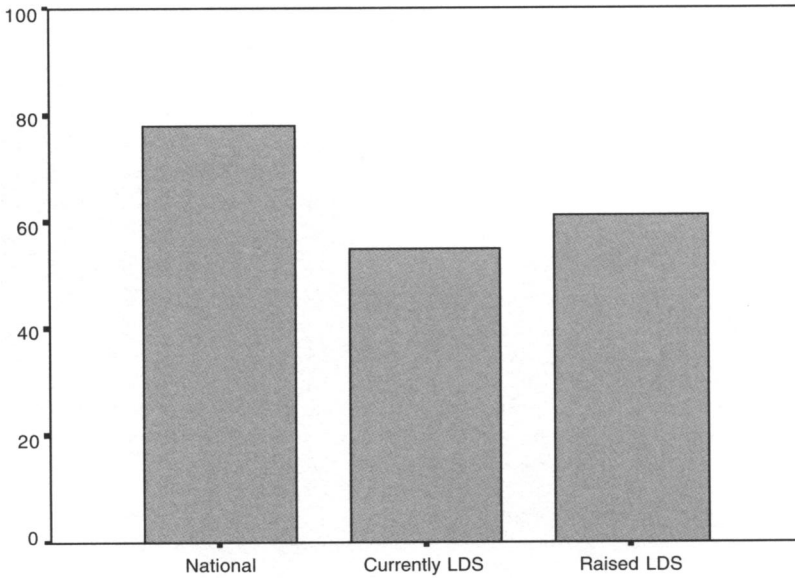FIGURE 7. Percent Having Premarital Sex by Age 22, GSS

FIGURE 8. Percent of Women Not Virgins at Their First Wedding, GSS

Some family scholars believe that premarital sex may inhibit the ability to build committed stable intimate relationships. Premarital sex and cohabitation are correlated with marital instability. The explanation for this correlation, however, is debated.[45]

According to the National Survey of Family Growth, 78% of women nationally and 55% of LDS women have had sex before marriage (see Figure 8). Mormons are more likely to say premarital sex is wrong and are less likely to have sex before getting married. As a side note, an earlier report of high levels of premarital sex among Mormons[46] was criticized because it was based on affiliation at the time of the survey. It is possible that some people are unchaste in adolescence and later convert to Mormonism and follow church teachings on chastity. The 1995 NSFG asks both current and childhood religion. Interestingly, those who were raised LDS have higher rates of premarital sex than those who are currently LDS. Apparently, those who disaffiliate are more likely to be sexually active than those who convert to Mormonism. Harold Christensen has studied the sexual behavior of Mormon college students, comparing them with students in the Midwest and Denmark. He found substantially lower rates of sexual activity among Mormons, but also found that sexually experienced Mormons were much less sexually active.[47]

Childlessness: Families are much smaller than they used to be. The average number of children in many European families is approaching one.[48] Some have expressed concern that people are so self-focused that they do not have time for or interest in having children. According to LDS doctrine, raising children is a critical part of God's plan, and families are the divinely appointed way to do so. In the GSS, less than two percent of the population thinks the ideal family would have no children (see Figure 9). A small percentage expect not to have any children themselves. Moreover, the trend does not suggest an increase in childlessness. Not surprisingly, childlessness in less common among Mormons than is the case nationally. Of course, some people expect to have children but

---

45. Lee A. Lillard, Michael J. Brien, and Linda J. Waite, "Pre-Marital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Dissolution: Is It Self-Selection?," *Demography* 32, no. 3 (1995): 437–458; Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, "Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53, no. 4 (1991): 845–855; Tim B. Heaton, "Feedback: Comment on 'Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce,'" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55, no. 1 (1993): 240–241.

46. Tim B. Heaton, "Family Decline and Disassociation: Changing Family Demographics Since the 1950s," *Family Perspective* 27, no. 2 (1993): 127–146.

47. Harold Christensen, "Stress Points in Mormon Family Culture," *Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 4 (1974): 20, and "Mormon Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 2 (1977): 62.

48. Population Reference Bureau, 1999 *World Population Data Sheet* (Washington, D.C.).
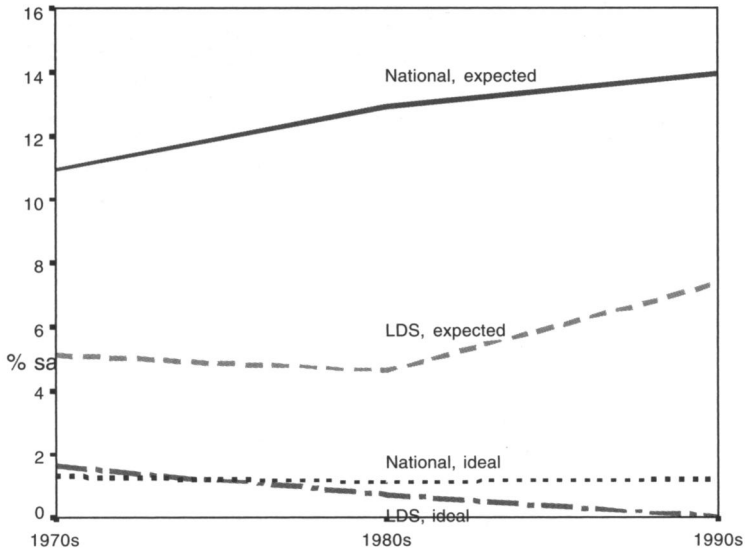
FIGURE 9. Childlessness Trends by Religion, GSS

continue postponing childbearing until it is too late.[49] There is no indica-
tion, however, that a substantial segment of the population will decide
not to have children.

Sexism: Sexism poses a serious threat to families.[50] The Proclamation
on the Family states that husbands and wives should be equal partners.
Evidence from around the globe demonstrates that we are far from this
goal. Female infanticide and selective abortion on female fetuses, giving
more food or educational opportunities to sons than to daughters, male
property rights and control over personal income, and male dominance
of political processes reveal widespread gender bias. Data sources used
for this research do not include good measures of sexism or male domi-
nance within the family and this paper does not review the vast litera-
ture on this topic. Even though feminism's critique of the family may
seem to be anti-family, the feminist movement and broader movements
in support of women's rights offer solutions to the problem of sexism.

---

49. Tim B. Heaton, Cardell K. Jacobson, and Kimberlee Holland, "Persistence and
Change in Decisions to Remain Childless," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (May 1999):
531–539.

50. Tim B. Heaton and Tamilyn Bodine-Heaton, "Is Feminism a Threat to the Fam-
ily?," *Sunstone* 17, no. 2 (1994): 14–17.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I have made a list of demographic trends affecting the family (see Table 2). Given the incomplete state of knowledge and the focus on demographic trends, I offer this list as a working hypothesis for discussion, not as a definitive statement. Many other issues could be considered for inclusion such as the media and pornography. My empirical criteria for making the list of greatest threats include: (1) the trend affects a large number of people, (2) the trend has large and inter-generational impacts on the ability to be good parents and good partners, and (3) the trend indicates deterioration in the quality of family life.

Poverty meets these three criteria and belongs toward the top of the list. The Proclamation on the Family clearly states that families have a responsibility to provide for the physical needs of their members. Poverty limits the family's capacity to provide, thus, reducing life chances for children and the quality of life of parents. Poverty is increasing due to patterns of world population growth. This will be an increasing problem for the LDS membership as the church continues to expand in third-world countries. As we try to strengthen families, elimination of poverty should be high on the agenda. Abuse is another potentially critical issue because of its severe inter-generational consequences, but there is little evidence regarding trends.

A second group of trends has far-reaching consequences, but may not be quite as serious as poverty and abuse. These include interrelated trends of non-marriage, divorce, premarital sex, and single parents. Finally, three issues that appear to have less serious impacts on the family are working mothers, childlessness, and same-sex relationships.

One of my original motivations for preparing this presentation was to respond to conservatives who want to restore some version of the 1950s family. But this image of the ideal was probably a mythical version rather than what most families were actually like. Now I realize I was inclined to do the same thing I have criticized others for doing—using the family rubric to support my own ideological preferences. As long as we are using the family arena to pursue our own agendas, we will end up creating more debate than action. I think the above list includes issues that would make some groups at either end of the ideological spectrum agree and disagree. Some want abortion and single-parent families to be at the top of the list of problems while others want poverty and abuse to have high priority. Some want to conclude that same-sex relationships are not the problem while others want to conclude that working moms are not the main issue. I have tentatively suggested that neither of these issues should have top priority. So, one of my main conclusions is that standard ideological agendas or narrow focus on one issue may not get us very far in addressing problems that imperil the family.

TABLE 2.
Working Hypotheses about Family Trends

	U.S. rate	LDS rate (in U.S.)	LDS global	Consequences	Trend Short term	Trend Long term
Poverty	15% cross-section 25% long-term	a little lower	much higher	large, multi-dimensional inter-generational	up	down
Abuse	30-40% (?)	similar	?	large, multi-dimensional inter-generational	?	?
Non-marriage	10-15%	lower	low	large, multi-dimensional inter-generational	up	up
Single Parents	10-15% cross-section 50% lifetime	lower	lower	large, multi-dimensional inter-generational	stable	up
Divorce	50% lifetime	lower	30%	not as great, but inter-generational	down	up
Abortion	30%	lower	30%	large impact on fetus	down?	up
Premarital Sex	80%	60%	lower	some consequences for later stable marriage	up / up world-wide	
Working Mom	75%	a little lower	lower	relatively small	stable / up world-wide	up
Same-sex Couples	5%	a little lower	?	relatively small	?	?

A second conclusion is that while there is cause for concern, not all of the trends are in the negative direction. Modest improvements in marital stability and declines in the abortion rate give some hope to optimists. Trends in abuse and sexism are less discernible. Greater attention to these problems could yield substantial improvements in the quality of family life. Ironically, attention to these issues is often based on an ethic of individual rights which some critics believe undermines the ethic of commitment to the family as an institution. Solving family problems generally requires some balance between individual and familial needs.

Finally, recent trends provide some good news for LDS members. Incidences of abortion, single parenthood, and premarital sex are lower for Mormons. The decline in marriage may be lower for Mormons and the increase in marital stability appears to be greater. These statistics reaffirm the benefits of emphasis on the importance of families. At the same time, other statistics suggest that there is still substantial room for improvement. In areas such as abuse, Mormons may have as severe a problem as does the nation. In other areas, they fall short of their high ideals. These results imply that LDS members should build in areas where they have a high quality of family life, while seeking to find answers to the problems faced by some families.