



EIGHTH EDITION

Public and Private Families

AN INTRODUCTION

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Andrew J. Cherlin

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AN INTRODUCTION

ANDREW J. CHERLIN
Johns Hopkins University

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PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FAMILIES: AN INTRODUCTION, EIGHTH EDITION

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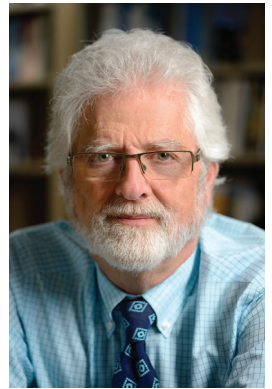
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For Claire and Reid

About the Author

Andrew J. Cherlin is Benjamin H. Griswold III Professor of Public Policy and Sociology at Johns Hopkins University. He received a B.S. from Yale University in 1970 and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1976. His books include *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America* (2014), *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (2009), *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (revised and enlarged edition, 1992), *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part* (with Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., 1991), *The Changing American Family and Public Policy* (1988), and *The New American Grandparent: A Place in the Family, A Life Apart* (with Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., 1986). In 1989–1990 he was chair of the Family Section of the American Sociological Association. In 1999 he was president of the Population Association of America, the scholarly organization for demographic research. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Academy of Political and Social Science, and the National Academy of Sciences.

In 2005 Professor Cherlin was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship. He received the Distinguished Career Award in 2003 from the Family Section of the American Sociological Association. In 2001 he received the Olivia S. Nordberg Award for Excellence in Writing in the Population Sciences. In 2009 he received the Irene B. Taeuber Award from the Population Association of America, in Recognition of Outstanding Accomplishments in Demographic Research. He has also received a Merit Award from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development for his research on the effects of family structure on children. His recent articles include “Nonmarital First Births, Marriage, and Income Inequality,” in the *American Sociological Review*; “Family Complexity, the Family Safety Net, and Public Policy,” in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*; “Goode’s World Revolution and Family Patterns: A Reconsideration at Fifty Years,” in *Population and Development Review*; and “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage,” in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. He also has written many articles for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *Newsweek*, and other periodicals. He has been interviewed on the *Today Show*, *CBS This Morning*, network evening news programs, National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*, and other news programs and documentaries.



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Preface

The sociology of the family is deceptively hard to study. Unlike, say, physics, the topic is familiar (a word whose very root is Latin for “family”) because virtually everyone grows up in families. Therefore, it can seem “easy” to study the family because students can bring to bear their personal knowledge of the subject. Some textbooks play to this familiarity by mainly providing students with an opportunity to better understand their private lives. The authors never stray too far from the individual experiences of the readers, focusing on personal choices such as whether to marry and whether to have children. To be sure, giving students insight into the social forces that shape their personal decisions about family life is a worthwhile objective. Nevertheless, the challenge of writing about the sociology of the family is also to help students understand that the significance of families extends beyond personal experience. Today, as in the past, the family is the site of not only private decisions but also activities that matter to our society as a whole.

These activities center on taking care of people who are unable to fully care for themselves, most notably children and the elderly. Anyone who follows social issues knows of the often-expressed concern about whether, given developments such as the increases in divorce and childbearing outside of marriage, we are raising the next generation adequately. Anyone anxious about the well-being of the rapidly expanding older population (as well as the escalating cost of providing financial and medical assistance to them) knows the concern about whether family members will continue to provide adequate assistance to them. Indeed, rarely does a month pass without these issues appearing on the covers of magazines and the front pages of newspapers.

In this textbook, consequently, I have written about the family in two senses: the *private family*, in which we live most of our personal lives, and the *public family*, in which adults perform tasks that are important to society. My goal is to give students a thorough grounding in both aspects. It is true that the two are related—taking care of children adequately, for instance, requires the love and affection that family members express privately toward each other. But the public side of the family deserves equal time with the private side.

Organization

This book is divided into 6 parts and 14 chapters. Part One (“Introduction”) introduces the concepts of public and private families and examines how sociologists and other social scientists study them. It also provides an overview of the history of the family. Part Two (“Gender, Class, and Race-Ethnicity”) deals with the three key dimensions of social stratification in family life: gender, social class, and race-ethnicity. In Part Three (“Sexuality, Partnership, and Marriage”), the focus shifts to the private family. The section examines the emergence of the modern concept of sexuality, the formation of partnerships, and the degree of persistence and change in the institution of marriage. Finally, it covers the complex connections between work and family.

Part Four (“Links across the Generations”) explores how well the public family is meeting its responsibilities for children and the elderly. Part Five (“Conflict, Disruption,

and Reconstitution”) deals with the consequences of conflict and disruption in family life. It first studies intimate partner violence. Then the formation and dissolution of marriages and cohabiting unions are discussed. Finally, in Part Six (“Family, Society, and World”) family change around the world and social and political issues involving the family and the state are discussed.

Special Features

Public and Private Families is distinguishable from other textbooks in several important ways.

First and foremost, it explores both the public and the private family. The public/private distinction that underlies the book’s structure is intended to provide a more balanced portrait of contemporary life. Furthermore, the focus on the public family leads to a much greater emphasis on government policy toward the family than in most other textbooks. In fact, most chapters include a short, boxed essay under the general title, “Families and Public Policy,” to stimulate student interest and make the book relevant to current political debates.

In addition to this unique emphasis on both the *Public and Private Families*, the text:

- **Addresses the global nature of family change.** Although the emphasis in the book is on the contemporary United States, no text should ignore the important cross-national connections among families in our globalized economy. New in this edition, the text includes a chapter on “International Family Change” that provides a comprehensive treatment of the major types of change that are occurring in family life around the world (Chapter 13).
- **Includes distinctive chapters.** The attention to the public family led me to write several chapters that are not included in some sociology of the family textbooks. These include, in addition to the new chapter on international family change, Chapter 14, “The Family, the State, and Social Policy,” and Chapter 10, “Older People and Their Families.” These chapters examine issues of great current interest, such as income assistance to poor families, the costs of the Social Security and Medicare programs, and the extension of marriage to same-sex couples. Throughout these and other chapters, variations by race, ethnicity, and gender are explored.
- **Gives special attention to the research methods used by family sociologists.** To give students an understanding of how sociologists study the family, I include a section in Chapter 1 titled, “How Do Family Sociologists Know What They Know?” This material explains the ways that family sociologists go about their research. Then in other chapters, I include boxed essays under a similar title on subjects ranging from national surveys to feminist research methods.

Pedagogy

Each chapter begins in a way that engages the reader: the controversy over whether the Scarborough 11 in Hartford, Connecticut, constitute a family (Chapter 1); the transgender moment (Chapter 3); the letters that Alexander Hamilton wrote to a man he loved (Chapter 6); the courtship of Maud Rittenhouse in the 1880s (Chapter 7); and so forth. And each of the six parts of the book is preceded by a brief introduction that sets the stage.

Several *Quick Review* boxes in each chapter include bulleted, one-sentence summaries of the key points of the preceding sections. Each chapter also contains the following types of questions:

- *Looking Forward*—Questions that preview the chapter themes and topics.
- *Ask Yourself*—Two questions that appear at the end of each of the boxed features.
- *Looking Back*—Looking Forward questions reiterated at the end of each chapter, around which the chapter summaries are organized.
- *Thinking about Families*—Two questions that appear at the end of each chapter and are designed to encourage critical thinking about the “public” and the “private” family.

What's New in Each Chapter?

As always, all statistics in the text and all figures have been updated whenever possible. Many minor revisions have been made in each chapter. The most prominent addition is a new chapter on international family change. It pulls together some material that had been included in other chapters in the previous editions, but it also adds much new material. Other changes are presented in the following list:

CHAPTER 1. PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FAMILIES

- A discussion of the “Scarborough 11” controversy and what it can teach us about the definition of the family begins the chapter.
- The section on “Marriage and Individualism” has been moved to later in the chapter and retitled “Family Life and Individualism.”
- The “Families and the Great Recession” boxed features that were in several chapters in the previous editions have been deleted now that the Great Recession has been over for several years.

CHAPTER 2. THE HISTORY OF THE FAMILY

- The family and public policy boxed feature on divorce reform, which was out of date given the recent decline in divorce, has been deleted. Chapters 3 through 13 still include family and public policy boxes.
- The stage of life that was called “early adulthood” in the previous edition is now called “emerging adulthood,” which is the term most researchers and writers are using.
- Discussion of Lawrence Stone’s term *affective individualism*, which is not used much in current work, has been deleted. However, individualism and its two forms, utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism, are still emphasized. See the “Family Life and Individualism” section of Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 3. GENDER AND FAMILIES

- An opening section that discusses the great increase in public attention to transgender people has been added.
- A new subsection on intersectionality has been added.
- The boxed feature “Feminist Research Methods” has been updated.

CHAPTER 4. SOCIAL CLASS AND FAMILY INEQUALITY

- The section on “Family Life and the Globalization of Production” has been moved to the new Chapter 13 on “International Family Change.”

- Citations to growing middle-class parental investment of time and money in children's development are new.

CHAPTER 5. RACE, ETHNICITY, AND FAMILIES

- The "How Should Multiracial Families Be Counted?" boxed feature has been updated to discuss how the Census Bureau is considering dropping the term "race" from the 2020 Census.
- Updated section on Mexican Americans notes that net migration from Mexico is nearly zero.
- Discussion of the intermarriage boom has been updated.

CHAPTER 6. SEXUALITIES

- The section on hooking up has been moved from Chapter 7 to this chapter.

CHAPTER 7. COHABITATION AND MARRIAGE

- Same-sex marriage is discussed in a new subsection.
- Recent articles claiming that a new equilibrium of stable, egalitarian marriage is emerging in most Western countries are discussed.
- The section on living apart relationships has been moved from Chapter 6 to this chapter.
- The subsection on "The Globalization of Love" has been moved to new Chapter 13.

CHAPTER 8. WORK AND FAMILIES

- The chapter now opens with a section on the *Fast-Forward Families* study of working parents in the Los Angeles area.
- An up-to-date consideration of parental time use is included.

CHAPTER 9. CHILDREN AND PARENTS

- Discussion includes the friend-of-the-court brief submitted by the American Sociological Association comparing children raised by gay or lesbian parents with children raised by heterosexual parents.
- The decline in the number of transnational adoptions is discussed.
- The section on transnational families has been moved to new Chapter 13.

CHAPTER 10. OLDER PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

- The term *active life expectancy* has been replaced by *health span*, following current practice, and the discussion of life expectancy and health span has been revised.
- The latest figures on spending levels and trends in Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are provided.

CHAPTER 11. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- The type of intimate partner violence previously labelled *intimate terrorism* is now called *coercive controlling violence*, a change that is happening in the literature. I was never a fan of the term "intimate terrorism." The new terminology is also more consistent with the other main type of intimate partner violence, situational couple violence.
- Greater attention is given to research and legislation on intimate violence among LGBT people.

CHAPTER 12. UNION DISSOLUTION AND REPARTNERING

- This heavily revised chapter combines two chapters from the previous edition, Chapter 12, “Divorce,” and Chapter 13, “Stepfamilies.”
- The chapter is now oriented toward both marriage-based events (divorce and remarriage) and cohabitation-based events (the formation and dissolution of cohabiting unions). This shift reflects the large and still growing proportion of all dissolutions and repartnering that are occurring outside of marriage.
- The discussion of custody and child support has been updated to reflect the sharp rise in joint custody awards in divorces.

CHAPTER 13. INTERNATIONAL FAMILY CHANGE

- In this chapter, new to the eighth edition, changes in family life around the world in the past 50 years are examined.
- The successes and failures of the predictions made in 1963 by William J. Goode in his important book on world changes in family patterns are discussed. The argument is made that family patterns have remained diverse, with great changes in some world regions and modest changes in others.
- The broad spread of the ideal of romantic love and the decline of parental authority over spouse choice are discussed.
- The position is taken that in areas where parents once chose their children’s spouse, a “hybrid” model of spouse choice has emerged in which parents and children work together to find a spouse.
- The consequences of globalization for family change are presented.

CHAPTER 14. THE FAMILY, THE STATE, AND SOCIAL POLICY

- The extent to which the American social welfare system has shifted toward providing more benefits for the working-poor and near-poor and less benefits for the nonworking poor is now emphasized in this family policy chapter. Examples of this shift are the expansion of the EITC and the restrictions the welfare reform bill placed on receipt of TANF benefits.
- The findings of two large, government-sponsored random-assignment studies of efforts to support marriage among the low-income population are reported.
- The causes and consequences of the momentous Supreme Court decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, to legalize same-sex marriage are assessed.
- Arguments in support of and against greater use of long-acting reversible contraceptives among low-income women are summarized.
- The observation that the conservative and liberal positions on family policy may have converged somewhat over the past several years closes this chapter.

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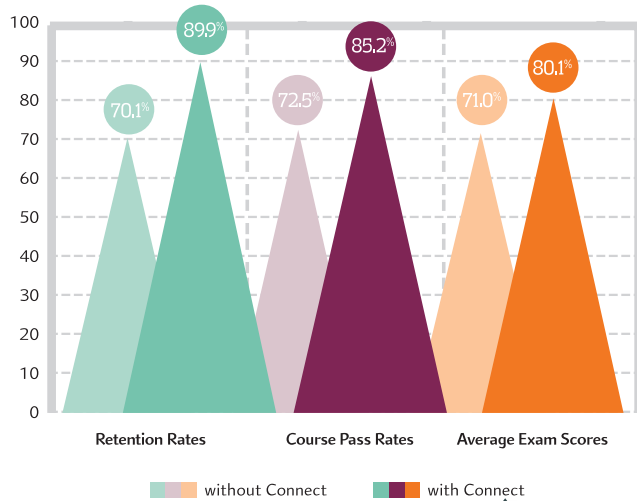
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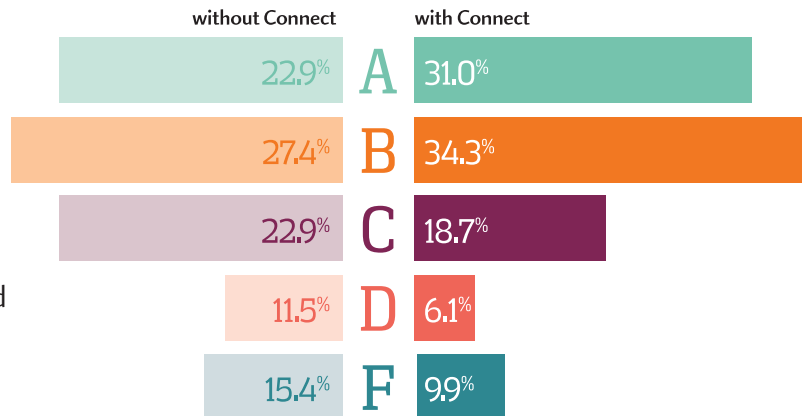
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Part One

Introduction

The family has two aspects. It is, first, the place where we experience much of our private lives. It is where we give and receive love, share our hopes and fears, work through our troubles, and relax and enjoy ourselves. Second, it is a setting in which adults perform tasks that are of importance to society, particularly raising children and assisting elderly parents. To be sure, people undertake these tasks not to perform a public service but rather to express love, affection, and gratitude. Nevertheless, family caretaking benefits us all by raising the next generation and by reducing our collective responsibility for the elderly. Indeed, people today frequently express concern over whether changes in the family have reduced parents' abilities to raise their children well. This book is about both the private and public aspects of families. It examines the contributions of family life not only to personal satisfaction but also to public welfare. The first two chapters provide an introduction to this perspective. • **Chapter 1** explores the most useful ways to think about families, and it examines the approaches that sociologists and other social scientists use to study families. • **Chapter 2** provides an overview of the history of the family. Over the past half-century family historians have produced many studies that provide useful insights. A knowledge of family life in the past can help us to understand families today.



Public and Private Families

Looking Forward

What Is a Family?

The Public Family

The Private Family

Two Views, Same Family

How Do Family Sociologists Know

What They Know?

Sociological Theory and Families

Four Widely Used Perspectives

The Exchange Perspective

The Symbolic Interaction Perspective

The Feminist Perspective

The Postmodern Perspective

Globalization and Families

Family Life and Individualism

A Sociological Viewpoint on Families

Looking Back

Study Questions

Key Terms

Thinking about Families

Boxed Feature

HOW DO SOCIOLOGISTS KNOW WHAT THEY KNOW?: *The National Surveys*

Looking Forward

1. What do families do that is important for society? What do families do that is important for the individuals in them?
2. How do sociologists go about studying families?
3. What are the leading theoretical approaches to studying families?
4. How does individualism influence American family life?
5. How is globalization changing family life?

In August 2014, a group of friends consisting of two couples with children, a couple without children, and two other individuals bought a house together on Scarborough St. in Hartford, Connecticut. To drive down Scarborough is to pass mansion after mansion on what may be Hartford's most elegant street. But the eight-bedroom home that they purchased had fallen into disrepair and had been on the market for four years. The Scarborough 11, as they came to be called, deemed it perfect. "We didn't see the need to live in these isolated nuclear family units," said one of the residents. "It's sustainable for the earth, it makes economic sense, and it's a better way to raise our children. We didn't need a multifamily house with separate kitchens and separate living areas."¹ The group includes two school teachers, a college professor, employees of a clinic and of a cultural center, and a stay-at-home dad. They share the renovation costs, the monthly bills, and the household chores. Each pair of adults cooks dinner for everyone one night a week.

The problem is that Hartford's zoning law prohibits three or more unrelated individuals from living together in a single-family home. The law defines a family as two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, civil union, or adoption—which is pretty much the definition that the U.S. Census Bureau still uses. Defenders of the zoning law argue that it is necessary to protect residential neighborhoods from the establishment of rooming houses or (worse yet!) fraternities. By this standard the Scarborough 11 comprised *too many* families: a Census-taker in the hallway might see one family consisting of parents and children to her left, a second family of parents and children to her right, a third family formed by the childless couple in the next room, and two other unrelated people making dinner in the kitchen. By her rules, which Hartford follows, none of the three families is related to each other, nor to the two singles. So there are more than two "unrelated" people in household, which violates the zoning law. Yet the Scarborough 11's radical claim is that they are *one* family and should therefore be allowed to live in a single-family home. "We have systems in place to ensure that we are functioning not just as a house but as a collective relationship," a resident told a reporter.

Shortly after the Scarborough 11 moved in, some neighbors complained to the Hartford Zoning Board that the group did not meet the zoning law and therefore did not have the right to occupy the home. The attorney for the Scarborough 11

¹ My account is drawn from stories in the *Hartford Courant*, including "Zoning Squabble: Family is What Family Does," November 21, 2014; "Scarborough 11's Family Dynamic One to Be Envious of," February 26, 2015; "Hartford Upholds Action against Scarborough Street Family," February 17, 2015; and in addition, "When 8 Adults and 3 Children Are a Family," *The Daily Beast*, May 10, 2015.

disagreed: “They may not look like your or my family but they are a family nevertheless and have a right to live there.” But the zoning board sided with the complainants and ordered the Scarborough 11 to vacate the property. The Scarborough 11 appealed the ruling and lost. When they did not give up their home, the City of Hartford sued them. In response, the Scarborough 11 sued the city in federal court, challenging its definition of a family. The case was still pending as this book was being published.

At the heart of the controversy over the Scarborough 11 is the question of what constitutes a family. It was a question that seemed to have a clear answer in the 20-year period after World War II, 1945 to 1965, when nearly all adults got married, divorce rates were modest, living together outside of marriage was frowned upon, and having a child out-of-wedlock was downright shameful. Back then, families centered on the marriage-based unit of husband, wife, and children. Starting in the 1970s, however, family life began a period of intense change that continues today. Divorce rates rose, cohabitation prior to marriage became the majority experience, young adults postponed marriage or forwent it entirely, childbearing outside of marriage became common, the family roles of women and men changed, and most recently same-sex marriage became legal. The uniformity of the post-World War II era gave way not to a dominant new family form but rather to a diversity of forms. It is therefore difficult today to impose a single definition of the family.

Yet the idea of family remains central to most people’s sense of themselves and their intimate connections in life, even as it has become harder to define exactly what a family is. In this regard it is similar to some other sociological concepts such as *social class* and *race* that are difficult to define precisely but too valuable to do without. Moreover, the definition of the family is important economically: It determines who is eligible for billions of dollars in government and corporate benefits that depend on rules about who is a family member. For example, if a low-income parent applies for food stamp benefits (now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), how much she receives depends on how large her officially defined family is. We must place some boundaries around the concept of family, some limitations on its shape, or else it will lose its usefulness. But how do we determine what the key aspects of family life are today and how can we best specify what we mean by the term *family*?

What Is a Family?

At one extreme, some observers claim that families are so diverse that the concept may not even be useful anymore. At the other extreme are those who press politicians to use the singular form “family” (instead of the plural “families”) to signify that there is only one proper kind of family—the married couple living with their biological children.

For example, I am eligible for health insurance coverage through my employer for my “family,” which is defined as a spouse and children under 18. If I were unmarried but living with a woman who was the mother of my children, I could insure the children but not their mother. If I had been living for years with a man whom I considered my lifelong partner, I probably could not insure him. Moreover, how one defines a family plays an important role in the debate over whether the family has declined.

I would argue that there is no single definition of a family that is adequate for all purposes. Rather, how you define a family depends on what questions you want to answer. Two key questions are

1. How well are family members taking care of children, the chronically ill, and the frail elderly?
2. How well are families providing the emotional satisfaction people value so highly—intimacy, love, personal fulfillment?

These questions address, respectively, the public responsibilities and the private pleasures the family is called upon to meet. For each of these questions, I submit, one of two definitions of the family will be helpful; I will call them the public family and the private family. These definitions provide two useful ways of looking at the same reality—and often the very same group of adults and children. Some observers may impose their own theological definitions of what constitutes a family from religious works such as the Bible or the Koran. But social science cannot determine the moral essence of the family, nor need it do so.

THE PUBLIC FAMILY

In examining the concept of the public family, it's useful to borrow a few terms from the field of economics. Economists who specialize in public welfare have introduced the notion of **externalities**, of which there are two types. First, **negative externalities** occur when an individual or a business produces something that is beneficial to itself but imposes costs on other individuals or businesses. For example, factories that release sulfur dioxide through smokestacks impose a cost on everyone else by polluting the air. The factory gains by producing goods without having to install expensive smokestack scrubbers, but everyone else loses. Second, **positive externalities** occur when an individual or business produces something that benefits others but for which the producers are not fully compensated. For example, a corporation may start an expensive job-training program in order to obtain qualified workers; but some of the workers may take jobs with rival firms after completing the training. The other firms obtain skilled workers without paying the cost of their training.

Some positive externalities involve the production of what are called **public goods**. These goods have a peculiar property: It is almost impossible to stop people who don't produce them from enjoying them. As a result, public goods are often produced in smaller quantities than is socially desirable. Suppose a town raises taxes to build a water filtration plant that cleans a polluted river. It cannot stop residents of other towns downstream from enjoying the cleaner water, yet these fortunate residents have paid nothing for the cleanup. In a situation like this, it is clearly in each town's interest to have some other town farther up the river produce the public good—the treatment plant. Yet if no town builds the plant, no one will enjoy cleaner water. One solution to this dilemma is for the county or state government to raise taxes in all the towns and then build the plant. Another is for the towns to reach an agreement whereby one will build the plant but all will contribute to the costs. Either solution compensates the producer of the public good for the benefits that others obtain.

Although it may seem like a long leap from factories to families, the concepts of externalities and public goods still apply. Families do produce valuable public goods—most notably, children (England & Folbre, 1999). For example, when Americans retire, they hope to receive a Social Security check from the

externalities benefits or costs that accrue to others when an individual or business produces something

negative externalities the costs imposed on other individuals or businesses when an individual or business produces something of value to itself

positive externalities benefits received by others when an individual or business produces something, but for which the producer is not fully compensated

public goods things that may be enjoyed by people who do not themselves produce them



U.S. families are more diverse today than in earlier times because of the great changes that have occurred since the middle of the twentieth century. Single-parent families, extended families, and complex families formed by remarriages are among the kinds of families with which the two-parent, first-marriage family must share its spotlight.

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government each month. The funds for those checks come from payroll taxes paid by workers. During the next decade or so, the many men and women born during the post-World War II baby boom will reach retirement age. Currently, there are about five persons of working age for each retired person; but by 2030 there may be only three persons of working age for every retired person.² This means that the burden of supporting the elderly will increase greatly. It's in society's interest, then, for families to have and rear children today who will pay taxes when they grow up. Children in this sense, are public goods.

² Considering 20 to 64 as working age and 65 or older as retirement age. See U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011a, Table 8.

More generally, it's in society's interest that today's children become good citizens with traits such as obeying the law, showing concern about others, and being informed voters. It's also in society's interest that they be productive workers who are willing and able to fill the needs of the economy. To be sure, critics charge that families often raise children in ways that reproduce existing inequalities between women and men (see Chapter 3) or between the working class and middle class (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, what they do is of great public value. They are greenhouses growing the workers and citizens of tomorrow.

But children are costly to raise, and a retiree will receive the same Social Security check whether or not the workers were raised by her. Therefore, it's in each retiree's economic interest to remain childless and to have every other family raise children. Yet if everyone followed this strategy there would be no next generation. This dilemma is sometimes known as the **free-rider problem**: the tendency for people to obtain public goods by letting others do the work of producing them—metaphorically, the temptation to ride free on the backs of others. Luckily, people have children for reasons other than economic self-interest. At the moment, however, they are barely having enough to replace the current generation of parents. Everyone benefits from the child rearing that parents do.

In addition, families provide other services that have the character of public goods. As will be noted in Chapter 10, adult children still provide the bulk of the care for the frail elderly. If I am old and ill, I will benefit if I have adult children who will care for me. But others will also benefit from the care that my family provides, because without them, I would need more assistance from the government-funded medical insurance programs for the elderly (Medicare) and for the poor (Medicaid). Consequently, the care my family provides will keep government spending, and hence taxes, lower for everyone. The same logic applies to care that family members provide for the chronically ill.

The first definition, then, concerns the view of the family you take when you are concerned about the family's contribution to the public welfare—the useful services family members provide by taking care of one another. It is a definition of what I will call the **public family**: *one or more adults who are jointly caring for dependents, and the dependents themselves*. Dependents are defined as children, the frail elderly, and the chronically ill. By “jointly” I mean working as a cooperative unit. The family members usually reside in the same household, but that is not essential. For example, an elderly woman may live in her own apartment but still receive daily assistance from her daughter or son. Nor is it essential that the family members be married or of different sexes. The important fact is that they are taking care of dependents and, in doing so, producing public goods. This definition would include, of course, a married couple and their children or their elderly parents. But it would also include a divorced (or never-married) mother and her children, a cohabiting couple with children, or a lesbian couple who are jointly raising a child who they adopted or who was born to one of them. It would also include the Scarborough 11, who are jointly raising children. (“I love living here,” one of the children told a reporter, “If you need company there's always someone there for you.”) Note also who would be excluded by this definition: a childless married couple with no dependent or elderly relatives, or different-sex or same-sex cohabitators without children, the elderly, or ill dependents.

The production of public goods invites public scrutiny, and public families are easily identifiable to outsiders by the presence of dependents. Because society has an interest in how well families manage the care of dependents, the law allows for

free-rider problem the tendency for people to obtain public goods by letting others do the work of producing them—metaphorically, the temptation to ride free on the backs of others

public family one or more adults who are jointly caring for dependents, and the dependents themselves

some regulation of these families—despite strong sentiment in the United States against intervening in family matters. For example, we require families to send their children to school until age 16. And state social welfare agencies have the power to remove children from homes judged to be harmful. More recently, several states have required medical personnel to report suspected cases of physical abuse of children. The public family, then, is about caretaking and dependency. It points us toward the kinds of kinship ties that are important for nurturing the young and caring for the elderly and the ill. It is a useful perspective for answering questions such as: How adequately will our society raise the next generation? How will we care for the growing number of elderly persons?

THE PRIVATE FAMILY

At the same time, the family is much more than a public service institution. It also provides individuals with intimacy, emotional support, and love. Indeed, most people today think of the family and experience it in these private terms. Although some of the intimacy is expressed sexually, the family is also where we get hugs as children and back rubs as adults. It is where children form first attachments, teenagers take steps toward autonomy, and adults share their inner selves with someone else. The public family is not the most useful perspective in this regard because the central question is not how we will care for dependents or reproduce the workforce but, rather, how we will obtain the intimacy and emotional support we desire.

An appropriate definition of the private family must, therefore, encompass intimate relationships whether or not they include dependents. Yet if we are to maintain our focus on families, the definition still must encompass some rules for defining what kinds of intimate relationships constitute a family. It is difficult to know where to draw the line between private families and other kinds of intimate relationships, such as two people who live in separate apartments but consider themselves to be a couple. Where exactly is the boundary between family life and less intensive forms of intimacy? Rapid change has undermined the consensus among Americans about the norms of family life—the social rules about what constitutes a family and how people should behave when they are in one. Let me offer, then, a definition of the **private family** not as an authoritative statement but rather as a starting point for analyzing this uncertainty: *two or more individuals who maintain an intimate relationship that they expect will last indefinitely—or, in the case of a parent and child, until the child reaches adulthood—and who usually live in the same household and pool their incomes and household labor.* This definition allows for children to be part of the private family, although the character of the intimacy between parents and children is clearly different from that between adult partners. It does not require that the individuals be of different sexes. The relationship must be one in which the commitment is long term, in which the expectation is that the adult partners will stay together indefinitely. I do not require that they expect to stay together for life because it's not clear how many married couples even expect as much, given the high rates of divorce. The definition also includes the notion that the partnership usually is household-based and economic as well as intimate—shared residence, common budgets. This reflects my sense that intimate relationships in families are not merely erotic and emotionally supportive but also involve sharing the day-to-day details of managing one's life. Nevertheless, I have added the qualifier “usually live in the same household” to allow for couples who live apart but in other ways meet the criteria of the private family.

private family two or more individuals who maintain an intimate relationship that they expect will last indefinitely—or, in the case of a parent and child, until the child reaches adulthood—and who usually live in the same household and pool their incomes and household labor