

THE  
AMERICAN PEOPLE  
Census 2000

The Lives and Times of the Baby Boomers

*By Mary Elizabeth Hughes and Angela M. O'Rand*

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Population Reference Bureau  
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RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION  
112 E. 64th St.  
New York, NY 10021

POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU  
1875 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 520  
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## FOREWORD

In December 1862, Abraham Lincoln struggled to maintain support for the Civil War. Several months before, he had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, a key step in transforming a war to save the Union into a war to end slavery. This was a deeply unpopular move among many, even on the Union side. The war itself was becoming a disaster. The president had recently fired the cautious George McClellan, commander of the largest Union army. His replacement, Ambrose Burnside, was in the process of leading that army to its costly and demoralizing defeat at Fredericksburg, just 30 miles away from the White House, where President Lincoln was revising his annual message to Congress.

Not, one would have thought, a moment when the Commander-in-Chief's mind would be on long-range demographic projections. But that 1862 annual message devoted several paragraphs to a summary of the growth of the American population, with tabular data from decennial censuses from 1790 through 1860, calculations of the growth rate, and projections for 70 years into the future. This was not, of course, an academic exercise. Lincoln was concerned to show the feasibility of a major peace proposal, to borrow enough money to compensate Southern slaveholders for the emancipation of the human beings they considered their "property." With the expected growth of the population, Lincoln argued, there would be plenty of prosperous Americans to share the burden of the national debt.

Today, we face dilemmas of our own—in political, social, and economic life; in our families and neighborhoods and workplaces. None of these, certainly, is so great as the agonizing choices faced by Lincoln. But his example is still valid. Now, as then, a deep understanding of the American population, and how it is changing, is an essential underpinning for decisions of all sorts. Now, as then, the first source to consult is the decennial census, our national record of two centuries of growth, transformation, and movement.

This series of reports from the Russell Sage Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau, *The American People*, sets the results of Census 2000 in context. Growth of the overall population is only one part of the story. The transformation of our experience of race, the growth of new minorities, immigration of millions from Latin America and Asia, the aging of the largest-ever

generation (the baby boomers), migration to the West and South, the growth of outlying suburbs, the transformation of family and work, the well-being of children—all these build the national stage on which our dramas of the next few decades will be enacted.

The reports in this series cover all these issues, using the census and other data sources, collectively providing a portrait of the American people in a new century. The first in the series looks at the census itself, a technical triumph of applied social science in an increasingly politicized environment. Subsequent reports in the series investigate the experiences of major racial and ethnic groups, immigrants, and Americans of different generations, the growth of new regions, and changes in household life. Each is written by an author or team of authors selected for their expertise with the data and broad understanding of the implications of demographic trends.

The Russell Sage Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau were both founded in the early decades of the 20th century, closer to Lincoln's time than to our own. Both are dedicated to bringing the results of first-rate social science to those who can use the results for practical improvements in public life. Both institutions, in particular, have a long record of elucidating the results of the decennial censuses.

President Lincoln, by the way, brilliant as he was, did not turn out to be much of a forecaster. He expected an American population in 1930 of 252 million; the number actually enumerated that year was just under half that size. The population of the United States did not exceed the number he expected by 1930 until the 1990 Census. We no longer expect U.S. presidents to do their own demography; that is probably progress.

REYNOLDS FARLEY is professor of sociology at the University of Michigan and a research scientist in its Population Studies Center. As author, editor, adviser to the U.S. Census Bureau, and interviewer, he has been an active participant in each of the last four censuses.

JOHN HAAGA is director of Domestic Programs and director of the Center for Public Information on Population Research at the Population Reference Bureau.

# The Lives and Times of the Baby Boomers

By Mary Elizabeth Hughes and Angela M. O'Rand

## INTRODUCTION

In the late 1940s, after several decades of declining births, the United States experienced a surprising and dramatic increase in fertility rates. Even more surprising, high birth rates continued until the mid-1960s, after which they dropped sharply. The large number of births in these years, combined with lower numbers immediately before and after, produced a birth cohort substantially larger than the preceding and subsequent cohorts—what we now know as the baby boom.

The first thing that comes to the minds of most Americans when the baby boom is mentioned is its sheer size. As the boomers moved through childhood, young adulthood, and into midlife, the education, labor, and housing markets were forced to adapt to larger numbers. More recently, attention has been directed to the potential impact of aging boomers on the economy, the health care system, and social programs for the elderly.

However, the baby boom is more than exceptionally large, it is *pivotal*. The boomers inherited, encountered, and redirected social change. Members were born into a nation already transformed by four long years of world war. As their lives unfolded, they experienced the profound changes that marked the decades between World War II and the 21st century, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the shift to a service economy. For the most part, the boomers did not initiate these changes. But since they encountered these shifting social contexts in young adulthood, their lives were disproportionately affected. The choices the boomers made about education, work, and family then reinforced some existing trends and set other trends in motion. The boomers are pivotal because they responded to historical change by living in new ways that set patterns for succeeding cohorts.

The lives of the boomers thus embody the post-World War II transformation of American society. At midlife, their experiences show some continuity with those of people born earlier in the 20th century. More noticeable, however, are the ways in which their lives

differ from and have been less predictable than the lives of their counterparts in earlier cohorts. Consequently, boomer experiences are not just different from those of their predecessors; their experiences are different from each other's. Due in part to the heterogeneity of their lives, members of the baby boom are highly unequal in achievements and economic attainments.

This report is about the lives and times of the baby boomers. We use Census 2000 to describe them at midlife, linking their current circumstances to their life histories. Using other census sources, we compare them to members of cohorts born earlier in the 20th century. We conclude by looking ahead, offering a set of stylized expectations for the boomers' future.

## LIVES IN HISTORY

If you ask three people to tell their life stories, you will hear three very different tales. Each story will have its own location, characters, and plot, reflecting the distinct circumstances and viewpoints of that person. But you will also hear the same topics and themes echoing through the stories. Each person will probably tell you where he or she grew up and talk about his or her family. They will all tell you about their educations, what they have done for a living, whether they married and had children, and how they have fared financially. If you listen closely, you will hear how these parts intertwined over time and how the whole played out against a backdrop of what was considered possible, appropriate, and important.

The emergence of common topics and themes in otherwise distinct biographies reflects these individuals' shared participation in society. Individual lives are unique, rich, and complex. However, as social beings, we are not simply idiosyncratic products of our own desires and imaginations. Our biographies are trajectories of socially defined roles enacted in contexts that present both opportunities and constraints.<sup>1</sup>

MARY ELIZABETH HUGHES is a late boomer who is currently an assistant professor of sociology at Duke University. She is a social demographer whose research interests focus on family processes such as marriage and coresidence, patterns of consumption, and individual health. She's been married to Fred Thomsen for 15 years and gave birth to Joel and Mark in the last six years. Joel is in first grade and Mark is an energetic 2-year-old.

ANGELA M. O'RAND is a War Baby born four months ahead of the baby boom. She is a professor of sociology at Duke University. Her research is concerned with patterns of stratification across the life course, with a special focus on socioeconomic outcomes such as earnings and pension wealth. She's been married to Mike O'Rand since 1967 and her 31-year-old son Chris is a lawyer in Miami. And, yes, she has a grandson, Dylan.

As they tell their stories, the three people will probably compare their lives and times to those of their parents and grandparents and perhaps of their children. They will reflect on how times have changed and how this has made their lives different from the lives of earlier or later generations. One person might note how World War II shaped his life because he served in the Army and subsequently went to school on the G.I. Bill. Another might observe that she would have liked to continue working after her children were born but that this simply wasn't done in her day.

Comparing lives and times is one of the ways we all make sense of social change. Social scientists usually make these comparisons using birth cohorts. A *birth cohort* is a group of people born in the same year or set of years. Members of a birth cohort move through life together, encountering at the same ages the same historical events and forces. The accumulated experience of a particular cohort thus reflects the intersection of lives and history.

Historical change alters the social context in which people make choices; so as history unfolds, lives change. At the same time, people's responses to historical change can redirect or even create change, so history reflects people's experiences. A particular cohort will be unique in some ways because cohort members experienced history differently than people born earlier or later. Events in early adulthood are usually considered especially important to the way a cohort develops. But cohort members can also be affected by events later in their lives (see Box 1).

Historical events, changes in social institutions such as the economy, and shifts in cultural ideas are what social scientists call *structural change*. People usually find themselves in the midst of these types of changes, which alter the context in which they have to live their lives. Comparing cohorts is one way of observing such structural changes. But by comparing cohorts, we can also observe how people react to structural change in their day-to-day lives. These *behavioral changes* are also a form

### Box 1

#### AGE, PERIOD, OR COHORT?

Social scientists use the concepts of age, period, and cohort to analyze the relationship between individual lives and social change.

Age reflects biographical time and individual physiological and social development. A person's chronological age corresponds, at least loosely, with his or her social status and roles. For example, young people are often in school, while middle-aged people are in the labor force. However, many scholars argue that the links between chronological age and social age are weakening. For example, recent research shows that many middle-aged people return to school.<sup>1</sup>

*Period* refers to historical time. Historical time includes the major events or changes that define a particular slice of history, such as the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, technological innovations, public policy adjustments, and shifts in attitudes. Period conditions set the opportunities and constraints that individuals encounter as they age.

The term *cohort* refers to a group of people who experience a particular event at a specific time. The baby boom is a birth cohort, a group of people who are born in the same year or, in the case of the boomers, the same group of years. Members of a birth cohort grow up together, grow old together, and experience particular historical events at similar ages. Birth cohorts are often referred to as "generations." However, social scientists typically reserve the term *generation* to distinguish stages within a family lineage.<sup>2</sup>

Tradition argues that a cohort's experiences in childhood and young adulthood leave a permanent imprint on the behaviors, values, and beliefs of that cohort.<sup>3</sup> Thus, particular cohorts think and act in particular ways and any observed differences between cohorts are due to these cohort effects. Because this argument is intuitively appealing, it is widely embraced. In fact, it has entered popular consciousness and is the basis for many popular images of the baby boom.

However, the expectation of cohort effects rests on three assumptions:<sup>4</sup>

- Individuals are particularly impressionable early in the life course. Research on human development shows that this is the most solid of the three assumptions.
- These youthful impressions are lasting; individuals do not change their behavior and beliefs in response to shifts in political, economic, or social context. This assumption has less support; although some core personal characteristics are set early in life, people also adapt their behaviors and attitudes in response to period conditions.
- All cohort members experience the same early events and in the same ways. However, an enormous body of sociological research has shown that race/ethnicity, gender, and social class stratify life experiences.

These complexities suggest that superficial generalizations about the baby boom based on the idea of shared experience are unwise.

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3. See, for example, Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," in *Studying Aging and Social Change: Conceptual and Methodological Issues*, ed. Melissa A. Hardy (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997); and Norman B. Ryder, "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 843-81.
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of social change—changes in what people do, such as going on to college or marrying late. Large-scale changes in behavior create new ways of living and new ideas about how to live.

Since World War II, the United States has undergone profound social change. In this report we describe the role of the baby-boom cohorts in the transformation of American society. We show that the boomers both inherited changes from the past and directly experienced extensive structural change. As they adjusted and adapted to these changes, they created new ways of living. Reviewing the lives and times of the boomers helps to make sense of our new American society and our new American lives.

### Six 20th-Century Cohorts

The baby boom was unexpected. On the eve of World War II, births were at an all-time low in the United States. In fact, some demographers were concerned that they were far too low and warned about population decline. No one would have predicted that 10 years later the United States would be in the midst of a baby boom, much less that the boom would continue unabated for nearly 20 years (see Box 2).

The baby boom began with a sharp increase in the number of births between 1945 and 1946, as couples “made up” for births postponed during the war (see Figure 1). Births continued to climb and reached a peak in 1957, when 4 million babies were born, compared

#### Box 2

#### U.S. CENSUS BUREAU DEFINES BABY BOOM

Since the U.S. baby boom was caused by a surge in the annual number of births, the U.S. Census Bureau defines the baby boom by a set of criteria identifying the beginning and end of this surge. Thus 1946 and 1964 were both watersheds in the fertility history of the United States.

Between 1945 and 1946, the United States recorded the largest one-year increase in births in its history; 1946 was also the first year since the beginning of the Great Depression that the crude birth rate topped 23 per 1,000 births and the first year in which the number of births reached 3 million.

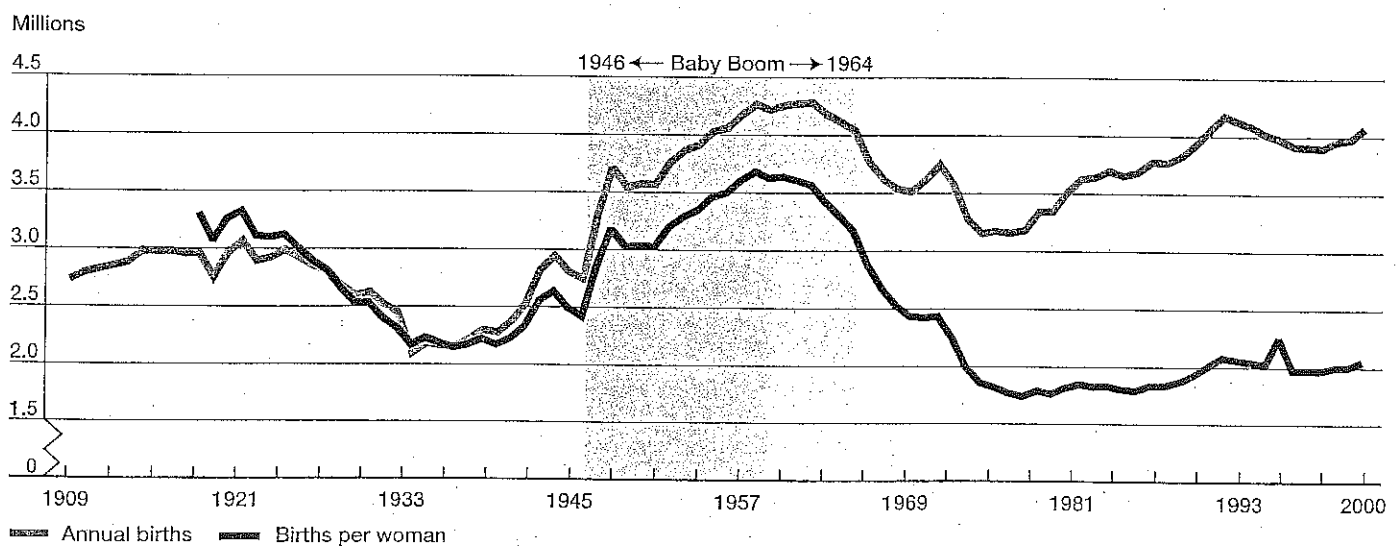
The year 1964 was the last year in a series of years in which the number of births exceeded 4 million; it was also the last time that the general fertility rate was more than 100 births per 1,000 women, and the total fertility rate more than three births per woman.

with just 2 million in 1937. The baby boom ended in 1964 just as dramatically as it began.

The demographic causes of the baby boom are well understood. From the end of World War II through the early 1960s, couples married earlier and started families more quickly than their counterparts in the 1920s and 1930s. During the 1950s, the average age at which men and women married and the fraction of people who never married dipped to historic lows. Once married, couples had a first child relatively quickly, pushing the

Figure 1

### ANNUAL BIRTHS AND BIRTHS PER WOMAN, UNITED STATES, 1909-2000



Note: Births per woman, also known as the total fertility rate, is the average number of children born per woman given current birth rates.

Sources: U.S. Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, various volumes; *National Vital Statistics Reports* 51:12; and R. Heuser, *Fertility Rates by Color, United States, 1917-1973* (1976).

Table 1

**SIX 20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN COHORTS**

Cohort	Birth years	Census year when ages 44–53*
Young Progressives	1906–1915	1960
Jazz Age Babies	1916–1925	1970
Depression Kids	1926–1935	1980
War Babies	1936–1945	1990
Early Boomers	1946–1955	2000
Late Boomers**	1956–1964	2010

\* Age is as of year prior to the census. Because the census is taken on April 1, most people will not have had their birthday by census day.

\*\* Most of the data presented in this report for late boomers are from the 2000 Census, when this cohort was ages 35–43.

average age at which women had their first birth lower as well. In contrast to the 1930s, nearly all couples went on to have a second child. These behavioral shifts were pervasive and visible across all races and social classes. In fact, most developed nations experienced similar, if shorter, postwar baby booms.<sup>2</sup>

Members of the baby boom were born over the course of 19 years; the last boomers were born as the earliest boomers were reaching adulthood. This means that even within the baby boom, individuals experienced history differently. For example, boomers are often associated with the Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s. However, only the boomers born earliest were involved in those protests; boomers born after the midpoint of the baby boom in 1955 were not in high school yet, and some were still in preschool. Similarly, people born in the first half of the baby boom entered a labor market with a shortage of workers in some expanding sectors; people born later in the boom entered a labor market crowded by their older brothers and sisters.

Because members of the baby boom did not experience history in the same ways, we divide the baby boom into two cohorts: the early boomers, born between 1946 and 1955; and late boomers, born between 1956 and 1964. The early boomers were ages 44 to 53 at the time of the 2000 Census, while the late boomers were ages 35 to 43.

To gain a longer-term historical and social perspective, we compare the early and late boomers to four 10-year birth cohorts from earlier in the 20th century. These cohorts are identified in Table 1, along with the census year in which they were ages 44 to 53.

## Cohorts in History

Each of the six cohorts has lived through its own particular segment of U.S. history. The segments overlap because the earlier cohorts were still alive when the later ones were born. But each cohort experienced events and trends in a particular way. For example, during the Great

Depression, the Young Progressives were young adults, the Jazz Age Babies were teenagers, and the Depression Kids were babies. Cohorts born later encountered the Depression only secondhand, through history books and the stories of their parents and grandparents.

The boomers' fate was to come of age in a time of great social transformation. Structural change accelerated in the United States after the Second World War, especially during and after the 1960s. As these forces combined with long-term secular changes already in place, society changed at a dizzying pace.

First, the United States underwent a series of economic shifts and shocks. The United States emerged from World War II as a dominant economic power with an expanding industrial base. In the 20 years after the war, the U.S. economy grew rapidly, incomes rose, and millions of Americans made their way into the middle class. Members of the baby boom were born during these prosperous times. However, a series of structural changes began around the time the early boomers entered the labor market. These forces transformed the United States into a largely service and information-based economy enmeshed in increasingly competitive globalized markets. This process extended over three decades, encompassing more than half of the boomers' working lives.

As the baby boomers entered the workplace, large-industry employers began seeking cheaper labor markets outside of the highly unionized North and Midwest. Unskilled and semiskilled workers in the inner cities were left behind, resulting in reduced wages and growing unemployment. These conditions sparked riots across large cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. An even bigger jolt came with the 1973 oil crisis, which ushered in a new era of painful economic adjustment and readjustment.

Technological innovations in manufacturing, communications, health services, and other sectors created markets without boundaries. The international division of labor continuously moved domestic jobs offshore to cheaper labor markets. Rapidly expanding computer-supported communications networks facilitated this new division of labor and created a new area of job growth that required higher technical skills. High-end and low-end service jobs became the new dominant sectors of employment. Professional and technical jobs grew in research and development, health care delivery, and business services, while positions expanded in the seemingly ever-growing discount retail sector and in personal services such as day care and home care. The era culminated in the dot-com revolution, economic boom, and technology bubble of the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup>

Second, the role of the government in the redistribution of resources, the provision of welfare support, and the extension of legal protections underwent equally dramatic shifts after World War II. While the boomers were growing up, public resources poured into building



schools, highways, hospitals, and houses. Growing prosperity and the legacy of the New Deal appeared compatible. By the beginning of the 1960s, the discovery of larger-than-expected poverty led to enactment of policies for a wider sharing of this prosperity. Extensions of the 1935 Social Security Act such as early, reduced retirement benefits; Medicare; and Aid to Families with Dependent Children were followed in the early 1970s by cost-of-living adjustments and the Supplemental Security Income program for the elderly.

The Great Society of the Kennedy-Johnson era also sought to extend the protection of the law and the opportunities of democracy to African Americans. Black boomers were born under de jure Jim Crow segregation in the South and de facto Jim Crow segregation in the North. These restrictive policies and practices were challenged by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, resulting in laws aimed at redressing racial inequalities, including the Civil Rights Act and the Open

Housing Act.<sup>4</sup> Although America has yet to achieve full racial equality, these changes profoundly altered life for black and white Americans. The boomers were the first to reach adulthood in the post-civil rights era.

But ideology reversed in the 1970s. The jolt of the oil crisis and the growing threat of global competitiveness shifted policies in the direction of fewer regulations for industry and retrenchment of welfare programs. The remaining decades of the 20th century would bring increased privatization of former public services, growing retreat of employers from occupational benefits such as pensions and health insurance, and programs moving welfare recipients to work. As they reached adulthood, the boomers experienced weaker social safety nets as risk was increasingly borne by individuals.

Third, a major change in U.S. immigration policy opened the doors to millions of newcomers. Prior to 1965, immigration law in the United States kept people from some countries out entirely and subjected others to

*Box 3*

**BOOMER BEGINNINGS: RACE, ETHNICITY, NATIVITY**

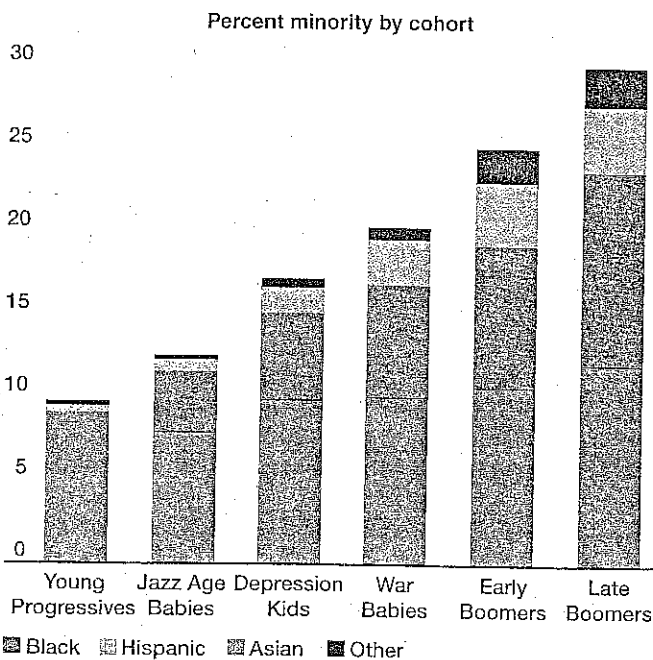
The baby-boom cohorts are more racially and ethnically diverse than previous cohorts, and the late boomers are substantially more diverse than the early boomers. A full 30 percent of the late-boomer cohort is composed of minority groups.

The percentage of blacks increased very little across cohorts. Increases in the percentage of "others" have been proportionately, if not absolutely, large. This growth can be traced to two factors. The likelihood that people of American Indian heritage will identify themselves as such on the census has increased over time. American Indians are the largest component of the "other" category for every cohort prior to the boomers. The large increase in the "other" category among the boomer cohorts is because Census 2000 was the first census to allow people to identify themselves as members of more than one racial or ethnic group. Most of the growth across cohorts in the minority population is due to increases in the Hispanic and Asian groups. A great deal of this growth is due to immigration; high percentages of Asians and Hispanics in both boomer cohorts are foreign-born (57 percent and 86 percent, respectively, for both cohorts). In fact, the percentage of immigrants of all ethnicities is quite high in the boomer cohorts in 2000: 12 percent among early boomers and nearly 15 percent among late boomers.

The above statistics reflect increasing yearly immigration and the fact that immigrants are usually between the ages of 20 and 50. Thus in the past 30 years, the baby-boom cohorts have been in the prime "receiving years" for immigrants.

The figure makes plain that the boomer cohort is not the only cohort inflated by immigration. The impact on the boomers has been the most spectacular among the cohorts we observe because of the historical timing of migration increases and the age pattern of migration. In this respect, the boomers are again pivotal—the impact of immigration on future cohorts may be even more pronounced.

To varying degrees, immigrants have shared boomers' history. Half of early-boomer immigrants have been in the United



Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

States over 20 years. When they were 10 years younger, about a quarter had been in the United States this long, about the same proportion among late boomers now.

Despite considerable progress in expanding opportunities to all subgroups of the population, race and ethnicity persist as major bases for inequality. Race and ethnicity also shape individual ideas about what is normal, appropriate, and important. Clearly, in the boomer cohorts, nativity is an additional basis for stratification.

Box 4

## IMAGES OF THE BABY BOOM

The image of the boomers that has emerged in recent media coverage is quite colorful and has several consistent themes. In drawing this conclusion, we conducted two random samples of articles published in major U.S. newspapers that contained references to the baby boom in the headline or lead paragraphs: articles published between June 1993 and June 2003; and articles published between December 2002 and June 2003.

**Homogeneity.** The most striking feature of recent commentary on baby boomers is the extent to which they are viewed as a homogeneous group. Nearly all commentary refers to them as an undifferentiated whole, lacking within-cohort differences.

**Shared History.** Members are assumed to share similar upbringings and a common set of cultural references. For example, boomers are often characterized as products of affluent, suburban childhoods; events such as the Vietnam War or Woodstock are considered pivotal in the lives of all boomers. Following from the assumption of shared experience is an image of boomers as a cohesive generation with a collective set of core values and beliefs.

**Well Educated.** Boomers are frequently referred to as the best-educated cohort in American history. This statement is then discussed as if it means that all boomers have college degrees. Hand in hand with this image is the perception that all members of the baby boom are professional and managerial workers.

**Married with Children?** In recent writing, boomers are most often portrayed as married with teenage or college-age children. Much attention is focused on the twin issues of empty nests and caring for aging parents. However, some commentary contradicts this family-centered image by focusing on the instability or even absence of boomer families.

**Affluent.** Boomers are widely perceived as financially comfortable and even wealthy. Marketers anticipate that aging boomers will drive up demand for high-end products such as vacation homes, luxury travel, and investment services.

**Innovators.** Boomers are viewed as the agents of the tremendous social and economic changes the United States has experienced in the last 40 years. Boomers are frequently described as pioneers: rewriting the rules, reinventing each life stage they pass through, and remaking society.

**The Me Generation.** One of the most pervasive characterizations of the boomers is that they are individualistic to the point of self-absorption. For example, baby boomers are viewed as self-indulgent consumers who have accumulated high levels of debt instead of prudently saving for retirement. Boomers are also described as obsessed with health and youth; they refuse to grow old gracefully, but will rely on products such as Botox, Viagra, and the latest herbal remedies to stave off biological aging.

quotas. In 1965, policies restricting immigration based on national origin were lifted and replaced with a system of preferences in which people with family already in the United States or with high-demand skills were given highest priority. These changes, combined with the pull of the U.S. economy and the push of demographic pressure in countries of origin, dramatically increased the flow of migrants from abroad.<sup>5</sup> Because immigrants tend to be young, these newcomers disproportionately swelled the ranks of the baby-boom cohorts relative to older cohorts (see Box 3, page 5). These "immigrant boomers" increased the size—and changed the face—of the boomer cohorts as they came of age.

Fourth, a revolution in cultural values changed the way Americans thought about "self." Individualism in some form has always been central to American culture. For example, self-reliance is a recurring theme in American history and literature. But the new individualism went beyond a materialistic self-reliance to a concern for autonomy, identity, and empowerment. Some scholars link these ideas to a broader shift in cultural values that became evident in all Western societies in the postwar period. This shift was away from a concern with the material conditions of day-to-day life and toward "post-materialist" concerns including self-expression and individual fulfillment. The result of these shifts was twofold: a decline in the power of traditional authority,

especially with regard to life choices; and an increase in the legitimacy of individual goals over family or communal goals.<sup>6</sup>

This cultural shift was particularly evident in the way Americans thought about gender roles and sexual activity. Beginning in the 1960s, ideas surrounding appropriate roles for men and women began to change, spurred on by women's movement into higher education and the labor force. Changes in the workplace were assisted by the inclusion of gender as a protected category in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Originally inserted by conservative legislators in an attempt to defeat the bill, the law had a tremendous impact in legally redefining women's rights. At the same time, attitudes toward sexual relationships became much more liberal and once-taboo premarital sex became more accepted.<sup>7</sup>

Although the boomers are often credited with inventing these ideas, it seems more likely that the ideas were part of a broader cultural shift. But the boomers did appear to adopt the new ideas wholeheartedly as reflected by their behaviors.

Finally, the size of the baby boom was itself a potent force. Some scholars argue that the baby boom caused many postwar social changes through the pressures and adjustments required to accommodate such large cohorts.<sup>8</sup> We agree up to a point with this argument, but we propose that the pivotal role of the boomers in his-

tory is both continuous and discontinuous. The boomers inherited social change, they lived through social change, and in their day-to-day lives redirected social change. Their large size amplified what may otherwise have been small differences, magnified what may have become modest effects, and made both larger than life. This probably explains why the public seems fascinated with the boomers, who have become a cultural icon for Americans of all ages (see Box 4).

## SCHOOL DAYS

Universal education has always been a distinctive (and some would say exceptional) characteristic of American society. In fact, the ideology of the American Dream is based in large measure on education accessible to all. In the common school movement of the 19th century, local economies of farmers and shopkeepers levied taxes to develop schools with the aim of ensuring literacy and local prosperity, which led to nearly universal access to primary school education. In the first half of the 20th century, the economy added factories and then large bureaucracies to farms and small businesses as its major sites of employment. Technical and verbal skills were required in factories and offices and increasingly on farms and in small businesses. Accordingly, secondary education was required and sought after.<sup>9</sup> By the eve of World War II, nearly universal access had been extended to secondary education.

Following World War II and beginning with the G.I. Bill of Rights, higher education became a mass institution, with unprecedented levels of government and private resources directed toward the development of a technically skilled workforce.<sup>10</sup> As the Cold War heated up with the launching of the Soviet

Union's Sputnik in the late 1950s and the U.S. mission to the moon in the 1960s, the ascendance of higher education on the national agenda and in the aspirations of the young accelerated. The boomers were thus born and brought up in a period when the demands for secondary and postsecondary education were the highest in history and were largely accommodated by a prosperous society. They inherited an educational system with nearly seamless opportunities to attain college diplomas and with improved chances for postsecondary attainment.

## The Best-Educated Cohort

The legacy of the American educational system is visible in the educational attainment of the boomer cohorts, often called the best-educated cohorts in the history of the United States. High school completion is nearly universal among boomer men and women (see Table 2), significantly higher than among their Jazz Age and Depression Kid parents. However, high school attainment leveled off across the boomer cohorts and dropped slightly among late-boomer men. The increased prevalence of less-educated immigrant groups in this cohort offers only a partial explanation for this phenomenon, because high school graduation dropped even among U.S.-born whites.

The boomers also have higher levels of college participation and completion than their parental cohorts. Taken together, those with some college and those with college degrees account for over half of the boomer cohorts. Contrary to the most exaggerated baby-boomer mythology, college completion is far from prevalent. Just under one-third of early-boomer men and a little over one-fourth of early-boomer women have baccalaureate degrees; among late boomers, only about one in four have graduated from college.

Table 2

### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY GENDER AND COHORT

Highest level of education	Ages 44-53					Ages 35-43	
	Young Progressives 1960	Jazz Age Babies 1970	Depression Kids 1980	War Babies 1990	Early Boomers 2000	Early Boomers 1990	Late Boomers 2000
<b>Women</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Less than high school	59	44	33	18	10	11	10
High school graduate	26	39	43	39	32	33	31
Some college	9	10	14	26	32	31	33
College degree or higher	6	7	11	18	27	25	26
<b>Men</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Less than high school	63	47	33	18	11	12	13
High school graduate	21	30	33	31	29	28	33
Some college	8	11	14	25	29	30	28
College degree or higher	8	13	20	27	31	30	26

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

Notably, the percentage of early boomers with baccalaureate degrees increased by 2 percentage points between 1990 and 2000. Such an increase in a maturing cohort is unique, both historically and from a cross-national standpoint. It reflects at least two distinctive cohort phenomena: the immigration of more highly educated adults over the decade, and the return to school by adult boomers to gain baccalaureate credentials. In the 1990s, economic factors increased the college premium, and the perceived threat of job loss motivated many workers to return to school.<sup>11</sup> However, the pursuit of higher education in adulthood can be motivated by life style choices as well. People who have some college but did not graduate are the most likely to return to college as adults. Large portions of the boomer cohorts had some college earlier in their lives, suggesting substantial potential for increased educational attainment later. Nearly one-third of boomer women had some college, exceeding men's levels. Recent studies have shown that women are especially likely to return to college after dropping out.<sup>12</sup>

The long-term increase in the level of educational attainment has been driven in part by changes in the economy described earlier and in part by successively better-educated parents passing this advantage on to their children.<sup>13</sup> Thus, each cohort has tended to be better educated than the last. In the case of college attainment levels, the trends display a notable surge upward beginning with the War Babies. A large share of this earlier cohort actually grew up in boomer families, with younger siblings born after 1945. They shared the same parents, whose educational backgrounds were improvements over earlier generations and whose aspirations for their children affected these adjacent cohorts in the same ways as they grew up in the 1950s and 1960s.

The War Babies and boomers were both exposed to enriched and expanded school curricula over the 1950s and 1960s and into the 1970s. An increased emphasis on science, mathematics, and foreign languages was motivated in large measure by the Cold War and supported by the passage of legislation like the National Defense Education Act of 1958. These funds built science labs in high schools, often managed by teachers whose own educations were supported by the G.I. Bill. They also affected other curricula. At higher rates than earlier cohorts, War Babies and boomers read American literature as varied as Henry David Thoreau's "On Civil Disobedience," J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, and British literature including *Beowulf* and the works of Lord Byron and Jane Austen. They had access in public schools to music lessons, drama classes, debate teams, and sports. But school expansion in this period also introduced curricular tracking, which channeled a minority of boomers into precollege tracks and others into general educational and vocational training tracks.<sup>14</sup>

Differential exposure to higher education would influence early diversity in political ideologies among

the War Babies and early boomers. Images of the 1960s and 1970s often include scenes of rebellious youth, usually on college campuses, marching for free speech and civil rights and against the Vietnam War. These images distorted the actual diversity of their lives at that time. About one-third of the early boomers served in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> Polls taken during the period disclosed highly divergent values and ideologies among them. Younger voters (including boomers) were significantly more likely to support right-wing candidates. Supporters of George Wallace during the 1968 presidential election were disproportionately young, from the South and rural regions, and less-educated and poor.<sup>16</sup> This schism would foreshadow a persistent theme in boomer politics.

### Educational Advantage For Late-Boomer Women

Levels of education have risen for men and women alike. But a crossover in men and women's attainments emerged among late-boomer women. These women are more likely than men to have participated in college and as likely to have obtained a college degree or higher. Their average years of schooling are higher than men's. A gender gap appears at the bottom of the educational distribution as well—a higher percentage of men than women have not completed high school. Women appear more likely both to persist and to return to school in adulthood following interruptions related to work and family roles.<sup>17</sup>

These patterns have continued among cohorts younger than the boomers.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the baby boomers—and particularly the late boomers—are pivotal. Their lives embody the redirection of long-term increases in gender equality toward educational advantages for women.

### Racial Inequality in Diplomas

Access to quality education has never been equally distributed. Race, class, and gender have stratified opportunities for educational attainment throughout U.S. history. The common-school movement of the 19th century and the secondary school expansion of the early 20th century were not equally inclusive in all regions of the United States. Segregated and unequally funded school systems prevailed in the South and adjacent regions until the 1960s, when desegregation was actively implemented following *Brown v. Board of Education* and passage of the Civil Rights Act a decade later.

Segregation suppressed the educational attainment of nonwhite and lower-class students. Indeed, African Americans began migrating to Northern cities after World War I seeking better school and job opportunities.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the most elite colleges remained segre-

gated by gender until the boomers had already begun to enter them. Finally, immigrants entering the United States during the 20th century arrived with different levels of prior educational attainment and encountered differential opportunities for school participation and educational attainment.

The pattern of increasing educational attainment has therefore not been the same in all racial, ethnic, and nativity groups. Groups have improved their educational attainment at different rates, eliminating some disparities and reinforcing or creating others. Except for Hispanic immigrants, all groups have experienced a steep increase in the likelihood of completing a high school diploma. The proportion of high school graduates among black War Babies increased dramatically over previous cohorts, then rose more gradually among the boomers. These increases probably reflect the improvement of educational opportunities before and after World War II, first among black cohorts who migrated to Northern or Western cities, then among those growing up during the expansion of secondary and postsecondary education under integration policies.

Although racial and ethnic disparities in high school completion have narrowed, gaps remain. U.S.-born Asian and white advantages relative to blacks persist. The low levels of high school completion among immi-

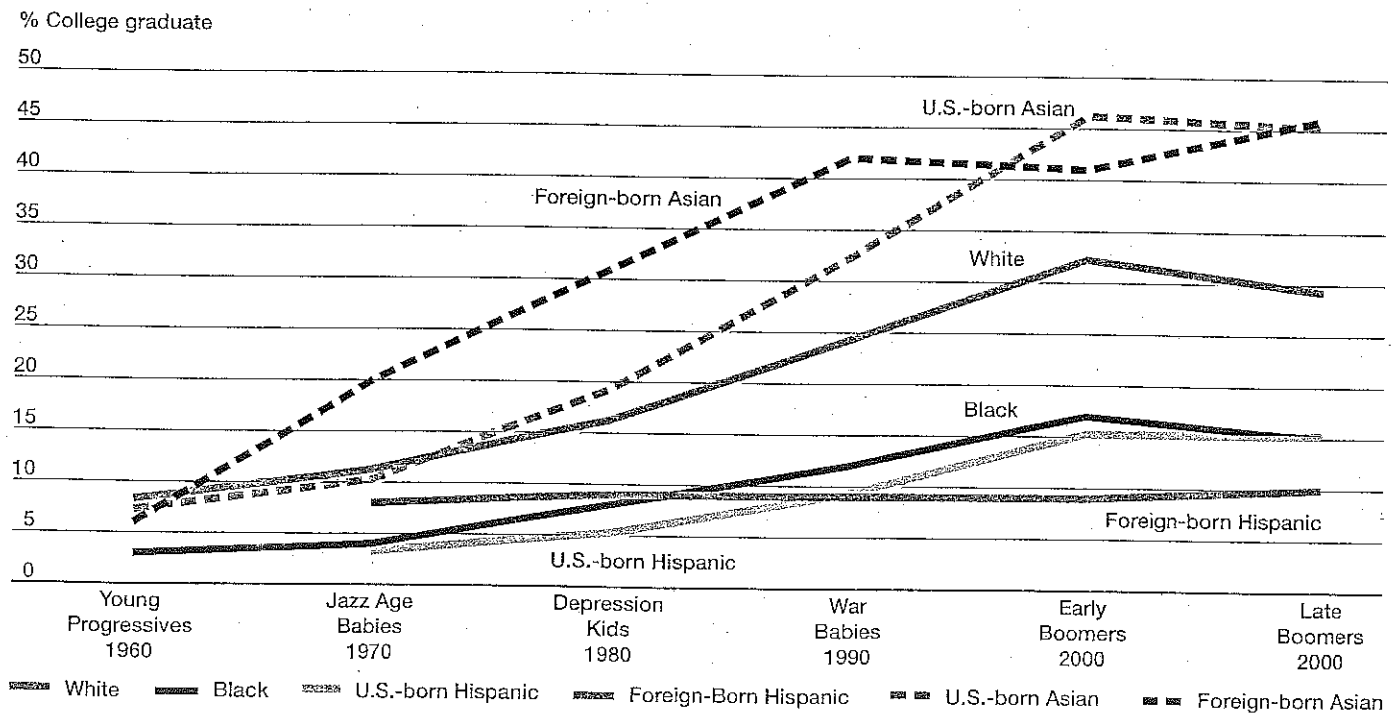
grant Hispanics no doubt reflects educational opportunities in their nations of origin and shows that the Hispanic immigration stream is dominated by people of lower education. This disadvantaged group represents a higher percentage of the boomer cohorts than previous cohorts.

Cohort rates of college completion diverge dramatically across race, ethnic, and nativity groups (see Figure 2). All groups have similarly low levels of college attainment in the Young Progressive cohort. Over the next four cohorts, the fraction of college-educated among U.S.-born and foreign-born Asians rises sharply, while the percentage of college-educated among foreign-born Hispanics does not increase at all. The percentage of white college graduates increased a great deal, but not as much as among Asians. Although the proportionate gains among U.S.-born Hispanics and blacks were larger than the gains among whites, in absolute terms their gains lagged far behind those of whites.

Thus, there is a negative side to cohort increases in educational attainment: Absolute race/ethnic/nativity differentials in college completion are wider in the boomer cohorts than in any previous cohort. Despite decades of efforts to extend the opportunity for higher education to all, differential attainment has persisted and is magnified in the boomer cohorts.

Figure 2

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS WITH A COLLEGE DEGREE, BY COHORT AND RACE/ETHNICITY/NATIVITY**



Note: Cohort members were ages 44–53 in the year given, except for late boomers, who were ages 35–43 in 2000.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

## BOOMERS AT WORK

The growth of the U.S. economy through history can be attributed in large measure to the growing size of the labor force and to the productivity of American workers. Generations of immigrants have come to the United States to find work and begin new lives. The 20th century began with the highest level of immigration in history, welcomed by industrialists like Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew W. Mellon who were building manufacturing industries that initiated the elevation of the United States to a world power by the end of World War II. These male-dominated industries became ladders of upward social mobility in which employment security, wage growth, and job promotions were expected in exchange for employee loyalty. Worker compensation was based on a family wage system, predicated on the male breadwinner family. This occupational welfare system was reinforced by New Deal policies. The pattern was interrupted only briefly by World War II, when masses of young American men were mobilized for military service and women went to work in previously male-dominated industries. Following the war, the labor market returned to "normal"—until things began to change about the time the War Babies and baby boomers began to work.<sup>20</sup>

As the earliest boomers came of age, the U.S. economy began to shift more rapidly than before toward service and knowledge industries and away from traditional heavy manufacturing. These shifts were driven by technology and by global processes including competition and the reorganization of the international division of labor. As mentioned earlier, the oil crisis of the early 1970s was a watershed event after which manufacturing jobs in the United States steadily disappeared. The new jobs required intellectual ability, social skills, and postsecondary credentials, and they suited women as well as men. Also, in part as a result of affirmative action legislation in the 1960s, the ideology of meritocracy was spreading in the workplace, where bureaucratic institutions began rationalizing their procedures and policies in the direction of gender neutrality.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, in addition to the disappearance of traditional manufacturing jobs in the major heavy industries, workplace institutions associated with these male-dominated jobs also declined. Union membership, which had almost never exceeded 30 percent of the labor force in the United States, began a steady decline. Many of the gains from labor-management accords that had bolstered job security, wages, and fringe benefits in male-dominated sectors disappeared with accelerating speed over the 1980s and 1990s. Worker power declined and employers increasingly shifted their allegiance toward stockholders and away from workers.<sup>22</sup>

## Young Boomers Confront a Changing Economy

Young baby-boomer cohorts entered this changing workplace and increased the number of people employed in the 1970s by over 21 million and in the 1980s by more than 18 million.<sup>23</sup> A large share of this growth was due to boomer women's increased participation—and persistence—in the workforce. Indeed, as the War Baby and baby-boom cohorts matured, the lives of men and women began to look more similar in important respects. Both spent more years in school followed by more years working than earlier cohorts. Compulsory military service still applied to War Baby and early-boomer men but disappeared for the youngest boomers and later cohorts. Accordingly, boomer men and women began following generally similar paths into adulthood by moving from school to work.<sup>24</sup>

The behavior of these young adults changed the age pattern of women's participation in the labor force. During the first two decades following the war, middle-aged and older women accounted primarily for labor force increases. War Baby and early-boomer women—and later, late-boomer women with young children—accounted for the continued growth in employment rates. The common thread across cohorts was married women's dramatic increase in employment. But the pivotal change among War Babies and boomers was the pattern of spending more years continuously at work after entering the workplace earlier in their lives and while maintaining family roles over their lives.<sup>25</sup>

Some scholars have associated these changes with the birth control pill. The Food and Drug Administration approved the pill in 1960. Five years later, 40 percent of young married women were on the pill. In another five years, use of the pill spread rapidly among unmarried women.<sup>26</sup> The control of fertility not only reduced the necessity to marry in order to have sex, it also reduced the costs of investing in higher education and committing to work and family careers simultaneously. But the pill can only help in explaining women's labor supply. As noted earlier, the demand for women's work had also increased.

## Women Working Much More, Men a Little Less

Work is central to the lives and identities of baby boomers. In midlife, nearly nine of 10 boomers work, representing the highest employment levels of all cohorts. Underlying these averages are two related but countervailing trends: the steady increase in women's employment at middle age and a less dramatic decline in men's employment in middle age. Boomer women's employment levels are higher than the average for all working-age women. While two-thirds of all working-

Table 3

**PERCENT OF MEN AND WOMEN EMPLOYED PREVIOUS YEAR BY COHORT**

Cohort	Year	Employed last year		
		All	Female	Male
<b>At ages 44–53</b>				
Young Progressives	1960	73	52	95
Jazz Age Babies	1970	76	58	95
Depression Kids	1980	76	62	91
War Babies	1990	83	75	91
Early Boomers	2000	84	79	89
<b>At ages 35–43</b>				
Early Boomers	1990	86	79	93
Late Boomers	2000	85	79	91

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

age women were employed in 1999, four of five boomer women were working (see Table 3). The biggest change for women occurred between the War Babies and the two preceding cohorts. Boomer employment rates are only slightly higher than War Babies' rates.

The 1990s produced a slight downward shift in employment of baby-boom men. Early-boomer employment rates are slightly lower than War Babies at the same age and reflect a drop of 4 percentage points between 1990 and 2000. And late boomers had slightly lower employment rates than early boomers at the same age.

These apparent declines among prime working-age men have been variously attributed to early retirement, disability, and job instability. Job instability is arguably the major contributor. The boomers, especially those born in the later years, have faced greater job instability over their work lives than their older siblings and their parents. Sectoral shifts, recessions, and corporate strategies to cut costs by trimming workforces through layoffs, contingent work, and outsourcing have confronted the late boomers nearly continuously since entering the labor market. Those without educational credentials were the most vulnerable to these shocks—so much so that some scholars suggest that the American dream of upward mobility may have been denied to a significant share of the baby boom.<sup>27</sup>

The growing instability of jobs and the decline of the so-called "employment relationship," which promised lifetime work with the same employer, may influence how boomers look toward retirement. Frequent job shifts and unemployment during the traditional peak earnings years (between ages 45 and 55) can retard pension saving. For those climbing the promotion and wage ladder with each job change, the pension consequences may be positive. But for those losing jobs and experiencing involuntary unemployment, retirement may be

more problematic. In any case, boomer men and women are approaching retirement with different work histories and with different retirement saving opportunities than earlier cohorts. The budgetary risks that the boomers may present to the U.S. pension and health care systems are now matters of considerable concern, bordering on alarm (see Box 5, page 12).

### Men's Jobs and Women's Jobs

The occupational distribution of workers across boomer cohorts has been influenced by at least three interdependent forces:

- Accelerating structural shifts away from blue-collar work toward high-end (professional/technical) and low-end (clerical and sales) white-collar work;
- Changing patterns of occupational segregation on the basis of gender and race/ethnicity; and
- Increasing demand for postsecondary credentials.

Table 4 (page 13) compares the occupational distribution of men and women across cohorts in their prime working years. The largest category of male workers continues to be blue collar (crafts, operatives, and related occupations), but the proportion of men working in these occupations declined by about 25 percent between the Young Progressives and the early boomers. Meanwhile, the share of men working in professional and technical occupations between these cohorts doubled.

The largest occupations among boomer women continue to be clerical and sales, although this reflects a decline from the high of 40 percent among Jazz Age Babies. The more dramatic change has been in women's participation in professional and technical occupations. Nearly one-third of early-boomer women are in this category and nearly the same proportion of both boomer groups falls into this category at ages 35 to 43. Women have also moved into managerial and administrative occupations; one in 10 boomer women is in this category.

In short, women's growing employment across cohorts has been channeled steadily into low-end (clerical and sales) and increasingly into high-end (professional and technical) white-collar work. Men typically remain concentrated in blue-collar jobs but have shifted to managerial and professional categories as well. Among boomers, men's and women's occupational segregation has persisted with respect to blue-collar and low-end white-collar work, but diminished with respect to professional, technical, and managerial work.

Indices of sex segregation calculated for comparable occupations across censuses suggest that sex segregation has declined within occupational categories.<sup>28</sup> Indices of sex segregation range from 0 to 1.0 and indicate how many of every 100 women would have to

## Box 5

### WILL RETIRING BOOMERS GO BUST OR BUST THE BUDGET?

When the oldest boomers reach age 59 1/2 (in 2005), some of them may begin withdrawing money from their retirement accounts; when they reach age 62 (in 2008) they are eligible for reduced Social Security benefits; and when they reach age 66 (in 2012) they may begin receiving full Social Security benefits. Is the federal budget ready for them to retire?

Average retirement ages steadily dropped below the age when workers are eligible for Social Security benefits, beginning with the Young Progressives and ending with the War Babies. The trend reflected two different sets of circumstances. First, workers covered by defined benefit pensions in major industrial and public sectors left the labor force voluntarily after many years in their jobs. Defined benefit pensions promise a calculable lifetime retirement annuity based on years of service and salary level at the end of the career. In addition, the manufacturing sectors contracted during the 1970s and 1980s; plant closings and downsizings encouraged employers to reduce their older workforces by offering retirement packages.<sup>1</sup>

A second set of workers retired early for different reasons. Some low-wage workers, usually without employer pension coverage, tended to retire at age 62 when they qualified for reduced Social Security benefits. The earnings replacement rates of Social Security provided incentives to leave often physically demanding jobs or poor working conditions. Many of these early retirees were in poor health or were disabled.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1990s, the median retirement age for men and women was age 62, but the labor force behaviors of older workers appeared to be changing. The three-decade long trend toward early retirement among men halted, while older women's labor force participation continued to increase.<sup>3</sup> Workers between ages 55 and 65 stayed in the labor force at higher rates than only a few years earlier. These workers included members of the War Baby cohort, whose educational and occupational histories have looked much like those of boomers.

Defined benefit pensions have declined as the major retirement benefit offered by employers, while defined contribution plans are spreading rapidly. Defined contribution plans are tax-sheltered retirement accounts accumulated as investments in portfolios of equity, bond, money market, and other speculative products. Workers are responsible for participation and contribution levels and bear the financial risks. Employers usually, but not always, also contribute to these accounts. The so-called 401(k) is the fastest growing type of defined contribution plan.

This innovation in the workplace has exposed workers directly to the bond and stock markets as investors. The stock market bubble between 1995 and 2002 first doubled stock prices and increased portfolios by nearly 60 percent during the boom phase of the bubble. This increased retirement by over 3 percent. However, in the bust that followed, which nearly wiped out the earlier gains, a comparable decline in retirement occurred.<sup>4</sup>

Recent evidence suggests that the late boomers are less likely to have retirement plan coverage than the older cohort at the same age. Early-boomer men's and women's coverage by a pension plan was 70 percent and 66 percent, respectively, in 1998; late-boomer men's and women's coverage was 66 per-

cent and 64 percent, respectively. Overall pension savings appeared to be low. In defined contribution plans, early-boomer men had median account balances of \$26,000 in 1998, and early-boomer women had \$22,000; late-boomer men had \$22,000 and women \$8,000.<sup>5</sup>

Three major changes in the Social Security system already signal delays in eligibility for full benefits to later ages for the baby boomers, increasingly less-generous benefits for boomers who retire early at age 62, and the elimination of mandatory retirement in 1986. For boomers born between 1946 and 1954, the age of eligibility for full Social Security benefits is 66; for those born later the eligibility age rises by two months for each year of birth until 1960, after which full retirement benefit eligibility begins at age 67. Retirement after eligibility ages brings higher benefits with each year of continued work. Meanwhile, reduced benefits at age 62 will decline for younger boomers.

The most recent change in the Social Security system is the elimination of the earnings test, which limited the amount retirees ages 65 to 69 could earn without benefit penalties.

Recent surveys of boomers suggest that they plan to work later and to continue to work after they retire. More advantaged members of the cohort with higher educations, better jobs, and high consumption levels may want to continue working; less advantaged members of the cohort with lower educations, bad jobs, and higher risks for poverty may have to continue working.

The issue of inequality is particularly poignant for disadvantaged minorities and women who are at higher risk of non-coverage by pensions because of their labor market locations. Women live longer than men, have longer experiences with disability, and greater requirements for long-term care. Widows and divorced or never-married women who find themselves alone in old age with limited retirement incomes are permanent concerns of retirement policymakers.

The proposed Social Security personal retirement account is a response to the fear that the baby boom's looming retirement presents a long-term financing problem and intergenerational burden. Concerns about the solvency of the Social Security Trust Fund have already led to major changes in the Social Security system to discourage early retirement.<sup>6</sup>

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**Table 4**  
**MAJOR OCCUPATIONS OF U.S. MALE AND FEMALE WORKERS BY COHORT**

Occupation	Young Progressives, 1960		Jazz Age Babies, 1970		Depression Kids, 1980		War Babies, 1990		Early Boomers, 2000		Late Boomers, 2000	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Prof./technical	9	13	14	14	17	17	20	24	22	31	20	29
Managerial/admin.	14	5	13	4	17	7	19	11	17	10	15	11
Clerical/sales	12	35	13	40	13	39	13	36	13	34	12	33
Crafts/operatives	44	20	43	19	38	15	33	11	34	9	37	10
Service workers	6	22	7	20	7	18	7	16	8	14	9	16

Note: Farmer and laborer categories were omitted. Cohort members were ages 44–53 in the year given, except for late boomers, who were ages 35–43 in 2000.  
 Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

**Table 5**  
**PERCENT OF U.S. MEN AND WOMEN IN HIGH-LEVEL PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL OCCUPATIONS, BY COHORT**

Cohort	Year	Men	Women
Young Progressives	1960	8	4
Jazz Age Babies	1970	12	6
Depression Kids	1980	14	8
War Babies	1990	17	12
Early Boomers	2000	19	18
Late Boomers	2000	18	18

Note: Nurses and elementary and high school teachers were excluded. Cohort members were ages 44–53 in the year given, except for late boomers, who were ages 35–43 in 2000.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

switch jobs from a predominantly female to a predominantly male occupation to produce a fully integrated labor force. The highest segregation index was 0.69 in 1910, implying that two-thirds of women would have to switch jobs. This level of segregation persisted until the boomers began to enter the workforce. Over the three decades following 1970, the figure fell from 0.68 in 1970 to about 0.53 in 2000.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, boomer women have broken paths into nontraditional professional/technical occupations; and they have been followed by younger cohorts with even higher entry levels who have encountered less resistance in more meritocratic workplaces.<sup>30</sup> Along these lines, when we compare cohort rates of employment in high-level professional and technical careers (excluding the traditional female professions of nursing and elementary and secondary teaching), the pattern of gender convergence is straightforward (see Table 5). Boomer men and women are equally represented in high-level professional and technical occupations at midlife; one of every five from both groups is located in an elite occupation.

These trends reveal the extraordinary occupational mobility of a significant minority of men and women in the boomer cohorts. Furthermore, they underscore the convergence of men's and women's commitments to careers because these occupations involve long-term investments in education and high time demands at work. For well-educated boomer women, these choices signaled a preference for a personally and economically satisfying career path as part of their lives, over and above family relationships.

### Race, Ethnicity, and Occupational Achievement

While we have observed some gender convergence among boomers in education and upward occupational mobility, the pattern among race/ethnic and nativity groups has been divergence. Mobility into high-level professional, technical, and managerial positions increased significantly between the Jazz Age Babies and early boomers for all white and U.S.-born groups, but rates of mobility have been highly unequal across these groups (see Table 6, page 14). Beginning with the War Babies, U.S.-born Asians have been the most successful in achieving these positions; over half of U.S.-born Asian boomers were employed in these jobs in 1999. Non-Hispanic white boomers followed at 10 percentage points lower, and blacks and U.S.-born Hispanics were approximately 20 percentage points lower than U.S.-born Asians.

The divergence is even more dramatic when immigrant groups are compared. Foreign-born Hispanics have not experienced any occupational mobility across cohorts. But Asian immigrant groups, who have come to represent relatively large portions of the boomer cohorts, have fared generally as well as non-Hispanic whites.

These inequalities follow directly from differential educational achievement levels. Higher levels of educational attainment moved boomers upward in occupational hierarchies. These advantages cumulated over time and brought other rewards, including higher occupational achievement. The credential advantage is evi-

Table 6

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS IN HIGH-LEVEL PROFESSIONAL, TECHNICAL, AND ADMINISTRATIVE OCCUPATIONS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY/NATIVITY AND COHORT**

Cohort	Year	Non-Hispanic whites	Non-Hispanic blacks	U.S.-born Hispanics	Foreign-born Hispanics	U.S.-born Asians	Foreign-born Asians
Jazz Age Babies	1970	26	10	12	13	24	27
Depression Kids	1980	32	18	18	15	37	35
War Babies	1990	40	24	25	17	43	44
Early Boomers	2000	43	28	32	16	52	41
Late Boomers	2000	41	26	29	15	51	48

Note: Nurses and elementary and high school teachers were excluded. Cohort members were ages 44–53 in the year given, except for late boomers, who were ages 35–43 in 2000.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

dent in the differential rates of occupational mobility that place men and women in the non-Hispanic white and U.S.-born Asian groups ahead of others. In turn, these occupational achievement levels influence earnings inequality among boomers.

### Unequal Paychecks

The last few years of sustained wage growth in the post-war United States arrived in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the early boomers began entering the workforce. Between 1945 and 1973, wages grew between 2 percent and 3 percent per year. After 1973, the growth in wages in the restructuring economy slowed to between 0 percent and 1 percent and actually declined in some sectors. One consequence of these trends has been an increase in wage inequality that accelerated over the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>31</sup>

Wage growth over the work career ideally begins with early job shopping, quickly followed by stable employment. Among early boomers, even lower levels of education could be overcome as handicaps to wage mobility if young workers quickly moved to stable employment within the first decade of their work careers. Stability built experience that improved long-term wage rewards.<sup>32</sup> However, this ideal scenario became increasingly elusive over the 1980s and 1990s. Employment instability, including job changes and periods of involuntary unemployment, became more and more pervasive among young workers by spreading from the manufacturing sector to mid-level white-collar sectors. Over time, wage penalties for these work patterns grew in tandem with an increased demand for college degrees.

The result at midlife for the boomers is the highest wage inequality of all cohorts (see Figure 3). Wage patterns (in constant dollars) across cohorts reveal a widening of the difference between mean and median wages for men and women, although the level of inequality has increased more dramatically among boomer men. The level of wages in a population can be measured in two different ways. The mean wage shows the arith-

metic average. The average is sensitive to values at the very high or very low ends. The median wage is the point at which half the group has higher wages and half has lower wages. The median is not sensitive to extreme values. Because of the differences in how the mean and median measure wages, comparing them shows the degree of wage inequality in the population.

The intercohort rise of mean wages relative to median wages indicates that when wage growth occurred it was at the top of the distribution. The intercohort trend in median wages indicates that men in these age groups generally experienced wage deterioration after 1980. Stagnation and then decline occurred for men at the bottom of the wage distribution and, for the boomers, wage decline at the bottom was accompanied by no gain at the top.<sup>33</sup> Early-boomer men at the bottom of the wage distribution in their 30s fell further by their 40s. Moreover, late-boomer men in their 30s looked worse than their older counterparts at the same ages.

Boomer women, on the other hand, show steady increases across the wage distribution, although higher wages moved up more between the War Baby and early-boomer cohorts. Late-boomer women are doing better than their counterparts at the same ages. These patterns probably reflect the educational advantages of boomer women, especially late-boomer women.

### The Gender Wage Gap Narrows a Bit

In 2000, early-boomer women earned 63 cents for every dollar their male counterparts earned. In that year, the gender wage gap for workers of all ages was narrower, 73 cents. Ten years earlier, the early-boomer gender gap was 55 cents, indicating a relative improvement for women in this cohort over the 1990s (although it is important to remember that men's median wages declined by 2 percent). The late-boomer gender gap equals their older sisters' in the same year. Early-boomer women experienced improved wages relative to men over the 1990s, but their younger sisters came

closer to men in their cohort earlier in their lives. Both trends reflect declines in men's wages as much as increases in women's for these cohorts.

Gender wage inequality occurs across the occupational distribution and even among boomers in the highest occupational categories. As we reported earlier, higher educational attainment moved more boomers into high-end service, professional, and managerial occupations. And men and women were equally represented in high-level careers by midlife. These men and women earned higher average wages than middle-aged workers generally, but they were still unequal among themselves (see Table 7). The gender wage gap among these privileged workers was higher; boomer professional women's median earnings were 58 percent of men's. The gap between the mean earnings of these groups was even larger at 52 percent, suggesting even higher inequality at the top of the distribution. The gender wage gap among well-educated workers is evident even in the most elite occupations that require extensive investments in educational preparation (meaning more than baccalaureate degrees) and extended work weeks and work years. For example, a recent longitudinal study following samples of late-boomer cohorts of male and female scientists from middle school to their early careers found that marriage and childbearing persistently depressed women's career advancement in the sciences.<sup>34</sup>

**Table 7**  
**MEN'S AND WOMEN'S MEAN AND MEDIAN WAGES IN HIGH-LEVEL PROFESSIONAL/ TECHNICAL OCCUPATIONS, BY COHORT, IN 1989 DOLLARS**

Cohort	Year	Men		Women	
		Mean	Median	Mean	Median
Young Progressives	1960	\$35,362	\$31,737	\$18,177	\$18,105
Jazz Age Babies	1970	47,006	42,545	21,760	20,510
Depression Kids	1980	46,255	41,306	20,078	18,705
War Babies	1990	51,610	42,000	24,333	22,000
Early Boomers	2000	52,225	39,760	27,120	22,720
Late Boomers	2000	47,247	36,920	26,512	21,513

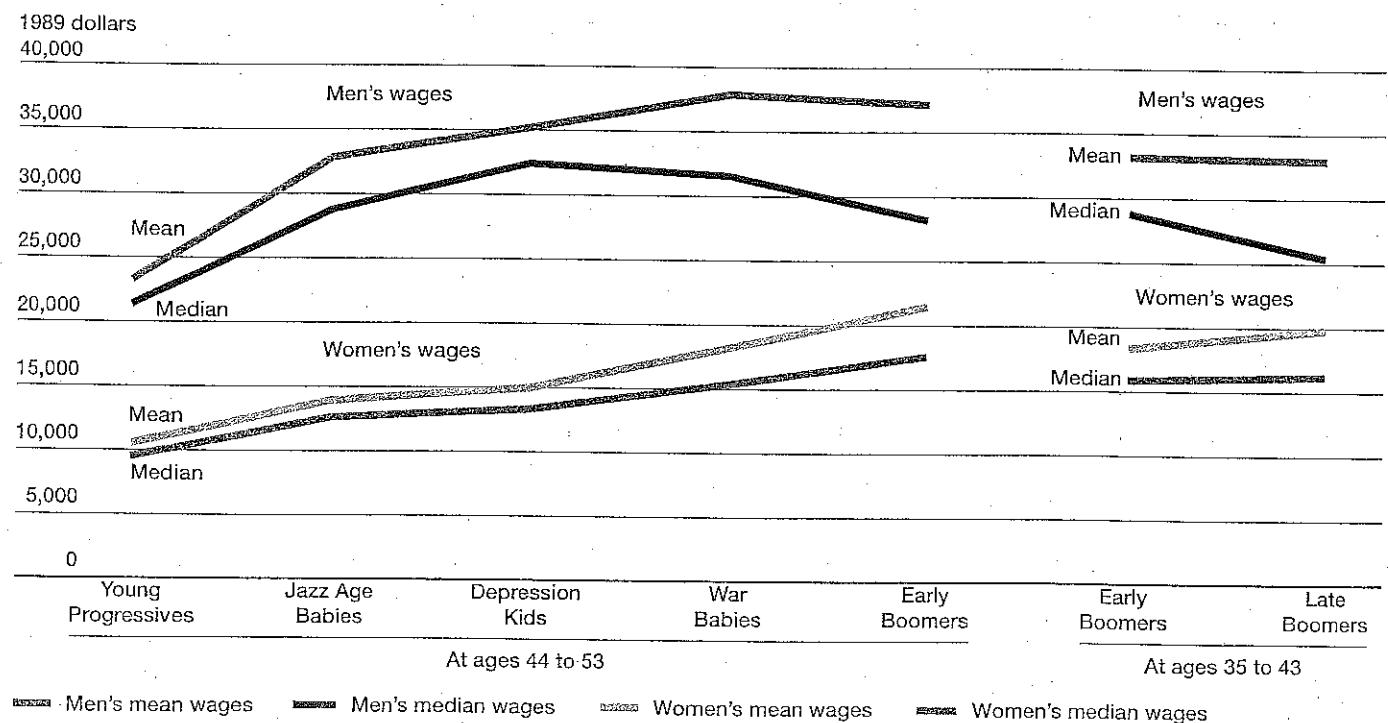
Note: Nurses and elementary and high school teachers were excluded. Cohort members were ages 44–53 in the year given, except for late boomers, who were ages 35–43 in 2000.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

The explanations for this effect reside both in the workplace (where family support policies have not been widespread over the childbearing and childrearing years of boomer women) and in the household (where the gender division of labor in housework and childcare has stubbornly persisted). Legislation in the 1990s to support

**Figure 3**

**MEN'S AND WOMEN'S MEAN AND MEDIAN WAGES BY COHORT, IN 1989 DOLLARS**



Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

family leave policies represents a beginning effort to confront these problems, but the legislation arrived too late to benefit the majority of boomer women.<sup>35</sup>

## FAMILY AFFAIRS

Americans are often surprised to learn that late marriage, permanent singlehood, small families, childlessness, and divorce have a long past in the United States. As in many Western nations, Americans have always waited to marry until they were economically self-sufficient, which meant that they often married in their mid- to late 20s and sometimes were not able to marry at all. Average family size declined in the United States throughout the 19th century, mirroring fertility declines in European nations. American divorce rates increased steadily between the Civil War and the outbreak of World War II. These family patterns, which reflect the long-term demographic history of the United States, were well established at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>36</sup>

The baby boom was the outcome of an extraordinary but temporary shift in these patterns. Between the end of World War II and the early 1960s, young adults married and had children at historically young ages. Few people remained single, and although divorce rates increased, they did so more slowly than they had in previous decades. The result, of course, was a large increase in the number of children born in those years. However, by the time the leading edge of early boomers reached adulthood in the mid-1960s, earlier family patterns were reemerging. Among late War Babies and the earliest boomers, marriage and childbearing shifted back to patterns more consistent with historical trends.

The bulk of the boomer cohorts inherited a modern family pattern with deep roots in the social and economic history of the United States. As the boomers came of age, they transformed this pattern. New experiences with education and work stemming from social change combined with new ideas about the importance of the individual to alter the context in which the boomers made decisions about family life. As they responded to new realities, the boomers adapted traditional family behaviors and created new family behaviors.

### Marriage Delayed and Transformed

Because marriage is at the heart of the American family, changes in marriage were fundamental to the boomers' transformation of family life. New economic and cultural realities dramatically altered not just the context in which boomers decided about marriage but the institution of marriage itself. The result was that the boomers, especially late boomers, married later in life than earlier cohorts.

Table 8 shows the percentage of ever-married women by age in each of our cohorts (cohort patterns of

*Table 8*  
**PERCENT OF WOMEN EVER-MARRIED BY  
SELECTED AGES AND COHORT**

Cohort	Age				
	20	25	30	35	40
Young Progressives	35	73	87	92	93
Jazz Age Babies	41	79	89	92	94
Depression Kids	51	84	91	94	95
War Babies	51	82	89	92	94
Early Boomers	45	75	84	88	91
Late Boomers	33	63	78	—	—

— Not applicable.

Source: Authors' estimates based on the Surveys of Income and Program Participation, 1986 and 1996.

family formation are generally symmetric for men and women, so to simplify the presentation we show results only for women). The age pattern of marriage among early boomers is not unprecedented. Members of this cohort married later than the previous three cohorts, but their age pattern closely resembles the pattern for the Young Progressives, the cohort that most closely matches historical patterns. However, the age pattern of marriage among late boomers is historically unusual. Late-boomer women and men are delaying marriage to a degree never recorded in the United States.

One cause of these marriage patterns was male boomers' experiences with education and work. Americans have always waited to marry until they were economically secure. This imperative applied especially to men, who were expected to provide most of a family's income. When economic conditions were inauspicious, marriage was postponed because establishing economic security was more difficult. As we have seen, boomer men entered the work world as educational credentials became more important to labor market success, lengthening the time required to attain economic security. At the same time, a restructuring and stagnant economy made attaining this security more difficult regardless of educational level. For boomer men with lower levels of education, such security was often simply out of reach. Some of the delay in marriage among boomers reflected the traditional response to the effects of an unfavorable economy on men's economic prospects.<sup>37</sup> This response was most marked among the late boomers, who had the more difficult time in the labor market.

But difficult economic conditions are only part of the story. The "silent revolution" in cultural values that began in the 1960s also affected marriage in the boomer cohorts. The weakening influence of traditional authority and increasing legitimacy of individual freedom profoundly altered Americans' ideas about gender, sexuality, and the family.<sup>38</sup>

New ideas about the appropriate roles for men and women were probably the most important catalysts for family change. Boomers grew up with a breadwinner-homemaker model of the family, in which men worked for pay and women cared for the home and children. This model, which had emerged with industrialization, depended on men's wages being high enough to support a family and the consequent exclusion of married women from market work. As structural economic change pulled women into the labor force, they were confronted by the formal and informal rules upholding this system. Bolstered by the new ideas emphasizing the power of the individual, women challenged these arrangements through the women's movement of the 1960s and 1980s. Although not all women actively participated in the movement, it had a tremendous impact on perceptions about what women—and men—could and should do and be.<sup>39</sup>

Boomer women encountered these ideas at the threshold of adulthood just as they were making decisions about education, work, and family. As they increasingly viewed work as a lifetime commitment central to their identities, boomer women took time to invest in education and establish work histories prior to marriage. Moreover, the economic foundations of marriage shifted so that women's earnings became a much more important part of family income. Thus, in contrast to previous cohorts, women's economic security appeared to be a prerequisite for marriage among late boomers.<sup>40</sup> Women's investments in education and work became necessary for marriage but further delayed marriage.

Women's growing economic roles posed a direct challenge to the breadwinner-homemaker family. This challenge was strengthened by the other half of the gender revolution, which concerned men's family roles.<sup>41</sup> A new model of masculinity encouraged boomer men to play a more active role in housework and childrearing. However, in contrast to women who moved overwhelmingly into paid work, men remained, on average only modestly engaged in the household.

Changes in attitudes toward sexuality were a second important catalyst for changes in marriage and family. Prior to the 1960s, sex was considered a matter for married people only; couples had sex only upon marriage or shortly before marriage. These attitudes were codified in a collection of laws prohibiting particular sex acts and the distribution (and even discussion) of contraception. The 1960s' cultural shift capped a century of changing attitudes, and many of these laws were abolished as norms became much more tolerant.<sup>42</sup> Sex before marriage became more accepted as sexual decisions became a matter of private and not public morality. These changes were helped along by important new advances in contraceptive technology, notably the pill and the IUD. These methods made control of reproduction much more effective and placed this more effective control in women's hands.

Boomer men and women quickly adopted these new norms. Greater freedom surrounding sexuality meant that one of the main drawbacks to delaying marriage, delaying regular and sanctioned sexual activity, was removed. In addition, women's increased control over their reproduction and sexuality amplified the effects of the gender revolution on the family.

Changing gender roles and shifting sexual norms altered the meaning of marriage. A third effect of changing values was to change the place of marriage in individual lives. For previous cohorts, marriage was a central goal and an important symbol of adulthood. For boomers, increased emphasis on self-fulfillment and personal growth meant that other kinds of goals, including interesting work, material satisfaction, and self-expression, became equally important. As marriage for marriage's sake became less important, marrying as soon as possible was no longer necessary. Paradoxically, the shift toward self-fulfillment also meant that people expected more out of their family relationships, especially from the conjugal relationship. Love and affection were certainly a part of marriage for prior cohorts. However, among boomers, an emotionally satisfying and sexually charged relationship became the main foundation of marriage. Finding such a soul mate is difficult, which probably contributed to delayed marriage among boomers.<sup>43</sup>

All of these economic and cultural forces increased the uncertainty surrounding courtship, and that uncertainty also contributed to delayed marriage among late boomers.<sup>44</sup> Changes in the meaning of marriage made the old rules of courtship obsolete. But the new rules were incomplete. For example, while women's new roles in the economy were quite clear, men's new roles in the household were not. Control over fertility changed women's bargaining position in complex ways. Some people embraced new ideas while others rejected them. Combined with a model of marriage based on egalitarian roles and emotional intensity, the lack of a map led to confusion and even distrust, as men and women struggled to make sense of these social changes in the context of their own lives.

The boomers, especially the late boomers, were thus the first participants in the retreat from marriage that characterizes the contemporary American family. Many people have wondered whether these lower marriage rates mean that late boomers are delaying marriage or forgoing marriage all together. A recent set of forecasts suggests that late-boomer women will marry at relatively high rates in their 30s and 40s. Thus, though they will not reach the nearly universal marriage of the Jazz Age Babies and Depression Kids, their levels of marriage will eventually be comparable to historical cohorts.<sup>45</sup> This forecast is consistent with survey data suggesting that boomers, as well as all Americans, value marriage and intend to marry.<sup>46</sup> What seems to have

changed is how we think and decide about marriage, not the desire for marriage.

These marriage patterns appear to be here to stay. Marriage patterns in successive cohorts are similar to those among late boomers.<sup>47</sup> American marriage has changed dramatically, and the boomers, by reacting to economic and cultural change, played a pivotal role in effecting these changes.

## New Challenges to Marriage and Family Life

Although boomers married at higher ages than preceding cohorts, the age at which they left home increased only slightly and only among the youngest boomers. This meant that the gap between major family roles—being a child and being a spouse or parent—widened. The boomers filled this gap with new forms of independent living, which transformed not only the family but also the entire transition to adulthood.

Historically, young unmarried people typically lived with their parents or in another household as boarders or lodgers. Young adults rarely established independent households, a transition associated only with marriage. Cohorts coming of age in the first half of the 20th century followed this pattern. When these young people left home prior to marriage, they usually did so to go to school, to serve in the military, or to find work. In each of these cases, they lived in some kind of institutional housing arrangement. Leaving home before marriage was much more common among men; women generally stayed at home until marriage.<sup>48</sup>

This long-term pattern changed with the boomers, although it first became visible among their older brothers and sisters, the War Babies. Unmarried boomer men and women left home in larger numbers. More important, they set up independent households, either immediately upon leaving or after they completed their educations. Some lived with roommates, others lived alone. Living alone in cities became a new, glamorous stage in the transition to adulthood, symbolized by television shows such as “Mary Tyler Moore” or “That Girl.”

These new living arrangements can be traced directly to changing values about the individual and the family.<sup>49</sup> Apparently, both boomers and their parents desired greater autonomy, more privacy, and freedom from family roles. Boomers were much more likely to leave home simply to gain independence than to find work or go to school. Parents were willing to subsidize their children’s autonomy—although they often welcomed them home again when things didn’t work out.

Increases in nonfamily living prior to marriage were coupled with the rise of a new living arrangement: non-marital cohabitation. In earlier cohorts, living with a partner outside the bonds of marriage was rare, con-

finer mostly to people of lower socioeconomic status who formed consensual unions. For most people, coresidence with a sexual partner was synonymous with marriage. Boomers were the first to depart from this pattern and live in sexual relationships outside of marriage in large numbers.

Cohabitation began among the earliest boomers and diffused rapidly. Among women born between 1945 and 1949 (the first four years of the early-boomer cohort), only 7 percent had cohabited prior to age 25. The corresponding figure for women born between 1960 and 1964, the last four years of the late-boomer cohort, was 37 percent.<sup>50</sup> High levels of cohabitation are one reason the late boomers show such low levels of marriage; the percentage of late-boomer women who have formed unions of any kind is much closer to the percent married among earlier cohorts.<sup>51</sup>

Changes in norms about sexual behavior were quite important in the spread of cohabitation. The stigma once attached to such unions was based on the sexual activity it indicated. Once this stigma was removed, or at least reduced, cohabitation became more acceptable. Some scholars have argued that cohabitation also served as a step in the courtship process. With marriage an increasingly risky proposition, boomer couples could use cohabitation to test out their compatibility prior to marriage.

These new living arrangements challenge the family because they are ways of living outside the boundaries of traditional family roles. But they also have taken on some of the characteristics of families. Both household formation and living with a sexual partner were once restricted to marriage. Thus the boundaries between family and nonfamily are blurring—or, as some would say, are being redefined.

Forming an independent household while unmarried is normative in the contemporary transition to adulthood.<sup>52</sup> Cohabiting with a partner is now so common that we forget how stigmatized it once was. Both of these behaviors originated largely in the boomer cohorts.

## The Rise of Serial Monogamy

Boomers sought a different kind of marriage and married later than their counterparts in earlier cohorts. Once formed, their marriages were less stable than the marriages of members of earlier cohorts. The high incidence of divorce among boomers is reflected in Figure 4. At every age, a higher fraction of both early- and late-boomer women have been divorced than women in previous cohorts.

High levels of divorce among boomers are rooted in the same economic and cultural forces that changed the nature and timing of marriage and living arrangements. Women’s economic emancipation and new ideas about self-fulfillment meant that couples were more willing to

Figure 4  
**PERCENT OF WOMEN EVER DIVORCED BY AGE AND COHORT**



Sources: Authors' estimates based on the Surveys of Income and Program Participation, 1986 and 1996.

end a marriage that wasn't working well. To the extent that the basis of marriage shifted more toward an intense emotional tie, the always-subjective standard for marital success may have risen.

However, in contrast to patterns of marriage and living arrangements, the boomers were not in the vanguard of increases in divorce. The War Babies brought the sharpest increase in divorce rates over earlier cohorts. The War Babies were at risk for divorce in the late 1960s, just when the long-term secular increase spiked sharply upward.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, boomers watched as their older brothers and sisters experienced historically high rates of marital disruption. This likely reinforced an attachment to the labor market among boomer women, who could not be sure that their marriages would last. Overall, high levels of divorce increased uncertainty about marriage among boomers. The trend toward cohabitation may have strengthened, as it became a "trial run" for marriage. By the time the boomers had married, attitudes had shifted in the direction of greater tolerance of divorce leading them to divorce at even higher rates.

Some claim that increases in divorce signal abandonment of marriage among boomers. The best evidence against this is the relatively high level of remarriage. In fact, by age 30, 12 percent of late-boomer women have been married twice. Remarriage existed in earlier cohorts, but a much higher fraction of these

remarriages occurred following the death of a spouse rather than divorce.

The pattern of high levels of divorce combined with fairly common remarriage has been called "serial monogamy." Although this pattern did not emerge among the boomers, they reinforced it and by their large numbers made it more visible. Moreover, serial monogamy is the outgrowth of the same forces that shaped other aspects of boomer life.

### The Variable Experience of Parenthood

Parenthood stands with marriage at the core of American family life. Accordingly, changes in childbearing and childrearing were also an important factor in the boomers' transformation of family life. The same historical and social forces that shaped boomer marriage patterns led to greater variation in the experience of parenthood.

Boomer women bore fewer children than women in earlier cohorts (see Table 9, page 20). Late-boomer women have not all reached age 45, which by convention is considered the end of the childbearing years. If many of these women have children, their completed fertility may rise a bit. But a surge above the level of the early boomers seems unlikely. Interestingly, the proportion of boomer women who remained childless is comparable to levels seen among the earliest cohorts

Table 9

## FERTILITY INDICATORS FOR U.S. WOMEN BY COHORT

Fertility indicators	Young Progressives*	Jazz Age Babies	Depression Kids	War Babies	Early Boomers	Late Boomers
Average number of children	2.4	2.6	3.1	2.6	1.9	1.8
Childless (%)	19	16	11	12	17	22
With four or more children (%)	22	26	35	24	12	10
First birth at age 19 or younger (%)	—	—	23	29	25	22
First birth at age 30 or older (%)	—	—	8	8	15	18
First birth while unmarried (%)	—	—	12	15	18	24

— Not available.

\* Ever-married women only.

Sources: Authors' estimates using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003; and the Surveys of Income and Program Participation, 1986, 1996, and 2001.

(remember that the Jazz Age Babies and Depression Kids, the cohorts that produced the baby boom, had historically low rates of childlessness). In addition, the proportion of women with large families declined dramatically among boomers. In this respect at least, boomer women are less diverse than women in earlier cohorts: Among women who have children, most have one or two.<sup>54</sup>

This apparent homogeneity masks important change and variation. The way these fewer births are distributed over women's lifetimes and the circumstances under which children are born diversified greatly in the boomer cohorts. These trends are boomers' main contributions to fertility change.

First, there is much greater diversity among boomers in the age at which women become mothers for the first time. Boomer women have births early, on time, and late.<sup>55</sup> Although the percentage of women having their first birth as teenagers dropped in the boomer cohorts, nearly a quarter had their first child as a teen. At the same time, a much higher proportion waited until their 30s to begin childbearing. Among the late boomers, this figure may well increase since not all of them are past childbearing age.

Second, the fraction of births to unmarried women is higher in the boomer cohorts. Nonmarital childbearing increased beginning with the War Babies, but the increase was particularly sharp among the late boomers. Thus, for many boomer women, marriage and childbearing are not coincident. Many of these births are to women in cohabiting unions.<sup>56</sup> But since cohabiting unions are less stable, these women may well end up raising children on their own.

Of course, nonmarital childbearing is not the only source of single-parent families among boomers.<sup>57</sup> High divorce rates have many parents raising children more or less alone. Since women were more likely to receive custody of children in divorce settlements, many of these single parents are women. The chal-

lenges of single parenthood, including relationships with the noncustodial or joint-custody parent, remain an important part of boomer parenthood. Remarriage, which brings a stepparent and often stepchildren, has added complexity.

Finally, boomer women were more likely to work during pregnancy and to return to work within a year after giving birth, so they were much more likely to combine the roles of mother to young children and paid worker. This new pattern paralleled an increase in "involved fathering" on the part of some late-boomer men. But as with sharing the housework, changes in fathering have been uneven and there is great variation in fathers' roles from family to family.<sup>58</sup>

Changes in childbearing reflect both long-term trends and the boomers' reconfiguration of the life course in response to structural change. The decline in numbers is a continuation of the transition to low fertility interrupted by the baby boom, although more efficient methods of contraception led to new lows in fertility among the boomers. Variations in the timing of parenthood are directly related to women's patterns of education, work, and marriage. On average, women's higher levels of education and increased commitment to the workforce delayed childbearing just as they delayed marriage. This trend was also aided by the new methods of contraception that gave women greater flexibility in the timing of births. The heterogeneity in the timing of childbirth in boomer women's lives reflected variation in the ways they fit childbearing around their education and work. Increases in nonmarital childbearing reflected longer periods spent unmarried and sexually active, increasing the likelihood of premarital births even with better methods of contraception. Most of the increase in nonmarital fertility among boomers can be traced to the higher number of women at risk of such a birth, not to increased rates of nonmarital fertility. Boomer women were much less likely to marry after a premarital conception than women in earlier cohorts.



Table 10

## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS BY COHORT

Living arrangements	Ages 44–53					Ages 35–43				
	Young Progressives	Jazz Age Babies	Depression Kids	War Babies	Early Boomers	Jazz Age Babies	Depression Kids	War Babies	Early Boomers	Late Boomers
	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
With spouse*	69	72	71	66	61	75	76	72	65	59
With spouse and relatives*	13	10	8	8	7	10	7	6	5	6
Alone	5	5	7	9	11	3	3	6	8	9
With children only	3	4	5	5	5	2	4	6	6	6
With children and others	3	3	3	5	6	2	2	4	5	6
With relatives*	6	5	4	4	6	7	5	4	6	8
With nonrelatives	2	1	1	3	4	1	1	2	4	6

\* May include children.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

## Many Kinds of Families

Boomers' family experiences have been quite different from the experiences of previous cohorts. In addition, on nearly every dimension the boomers' families are more heterogeneous than families in previous cohorts. Not only are boomers likely to live in family constellations that differ from those of the past, their families are also likely to differ from the families of at least some of their contemporaries.

Table 10 shows the proportion of people in each cohort who were living in different kinds of households in the cross-sectional snapshot of the census. Household structure summarizes patterns of marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and parenthood. For example, later age at marriage combined with the rising incidence of divorce leads to more people living alone. An increasing likelihood that the elderly will stay in their own homes reduces the fraction of multigenerational households. Since living arrangements change with age, we show data for most cohorts at two age ranges, from ages 35 to 43 and ages 44 to 53.

Two patterns appear. First, the diversity of living arrangements is higher in the baby-boom cohorts than in the cohorts preceding them. That is, the percentage in the most common arrangements, living with a spouse with or without children and other relatives, is less common, while the percentage in less common arrangements such as living alone is higher. The increased diversity is noticeable at both ages, suggesting that family diversity extends across the life course and that a smaller proportion of the boomers' lives will be spent in traditional households. Second, the fraction of people living in nonfamily households—alone or with nonrelatives—has risen dramatically in the boomer cohorts. The higher percentage of boomers living with nonrelatives primarily reflects the higher levels of cohabitation among boomers. Although these two patterns are

strongest among boomers, and especially late boomers, they appear to have started with the War Baby cohort.

One of the implications of different and more heterogeneous families in the boomer cohorts is a greater variety of family roles and a greater range in family relationships. Change in roles has taken two forms: the redefinition of traditional roles and the creation of new roles. For example, boomer women redefined the role of mother to "working mother" by combining motherhood with work outside the home. Some observers suggest that the role of father is bifurcating into the "good" dads, who are fully involved with their children and are equal partners in maintaining the household, and the "bad" dads, who, as noncustodial parents, are absent from their children's lives.<sup>59</sup> Family change has also brought new roles. Most obviously, the cohabitating relationship has introduced the live-in partner. Divorce has brought ex-spouses and ex-in-laws, and remarriage brings stepchildren.

These new roles are not well defined, so there are no rules for appropriate behaviors and obligations. Consequently, individuals have to adapt in their own ways and they have often been confused by their own lives.<sup>60</sup>

So far, we have described boomer families as a whole. This broad-brush picture conceals great variation in family structure by race, ethnicity, and nativity. The general pattern of increasing diversity over time is true of all groups but Asian immigrants. However, within groups the level and pattern of change for each arrangement vary. For example, foreign-born and U.S.-born Hispanics show no decline in the likelihood of living as part of a married couple in a complex household. This is consistent with research suggesting the greater salience of extended family living in the Hispanic community. Hispanic and Asian immigrants show no increase in the likelihood of living alone. Blacks are especially likely to be living alone with children. These differences are due both to economic constraints and cultural conventions.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

The prosperity the boomers experienced in childhood was the culmination of several decades of improvement in the American standard of living, interrupted only by the Great Depression. Income and wealth steadily increased over most of the 20th century, accompanied by a decline in overall inequality until sometime before 1980. Since then, the standard of living has arguably continued to improve, but a reversal in the earlier trend toward equality has occurred. A general pattern of dispersion in earnings, household income, and wealth has dominated the last two decades.<sup>61</sup>

Households are the basic units of economic activity in the United States and thereby serve as a gauge for the standard of living of families. Resource accumulation, consumption, and reproduction activities all occur in the context of the household, and household members produce significant goods and services as well. As such, households are more than addresses and social arrangements; they are complex economic relationships within which individual resources are pooled to manage both the expected and unexpected opportunities and difficulties of daily life.

The economic well-being of households has been a matter of increased concern among policymakers over the past four decades as the War Babies and baby boomers have aged. Changes in household arrangements have increased this preoccupation, since families have changed from the once predominant married male-breadwinner form to the current mixed complement of dual earner, single family-headed, and never-married single types. As a result, the incomes, poverty levels, and net worth of households are monitored to take account of the well-being of the nation.

At midlife, the boomers live with an even higher standard of living than their parents. But they also live with more inequality. The inequality is evident in their household incomes, home ownership patterns, and net worth. Their labor market histories contribute to this inequality, but so too do their family histories and current household arrangements.

### The Polarization of Household Income

Household income closely monitors the general day-to-day well-being of individuals and families. It represents the capacity to meet the ordinary and extraordinary needs of household members. After World War II, average household income grew until 2000. But beginning in 1980, inequality in household income increased dramatically. Households in the top fifth of the income distribution have increased their share of aggregate income, while those in the bottom four-fifths have lost ground.<sup>62</sup>

Table 11  
MEAN AND MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY  
COHORT, IN 1989 DOLLARS

Cohort	Year	Mean	Median
<b>At ages 44–53</b>			
Young Progressives	1960	\$31,473	\$27,264
Jazz Age Babies	1970	44,070	38,646
Depression Kids	1980	47,469	43,186
War Babies	1990	53,225	45,000
Early Boomers	2000	54,593	43,310
<b>At ages 35–43</b>			
Early Boomers	1990	48,147	41,200
Late Boomers	2000	49,340	39,544

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Micro-data Series (IPUMS), 2003.

These trends have held for the boomer cohorts. Median household income (in constant dollars) increased across successive cohorts, including both boomer cohorts (see Table 11). However, household income inequality was higher in the boomer cohorts relative to the War Babies, who up to that point had the highest level of inequality.

Increased income inequality is evident in the difference between cohort mean and median household incomes. As in the case of wages, the level of household income in a population can be measured two different ways. The mean income shows the arithmetic average. The average is sensitive to values at the very high or very low ends. The median income is the point at which half the group has higher income and half the group has lower income. The median is not sensitive to extreme values. Because of the differences in how the mean and median measure income, comparing them shows the degree of income inequality in the population. For example, increases in mean income combined with stability in median income indicate that incomes are increasing at the high end of the income distribution, but the middle point is remaining the same. Thus, a small proportion of high-income households have experienced income growth, but most did not, leading to higher levels of income inequality. This intercohort pattern mirrors the one observed earlier for earnings inequality, since earnings are the principal source for most preretirement households.

These trends in household income have been affected by the diversification of living arrangements and patterns of employment instability described earlier. Dual earner households and single family-headed households are not on level ground for household income attainment. In addition, involuntary job loss or wage decline—even in dual earner households—can depress household income.

Table 12

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS IN POVERTY OR AFFLUENCE BY COHORT**

Cohort	Year	Near poverty	Poverty	Affluence
<b>At ages 44–53</b>				
Young Progressives	1960	17	10	12
Jazz Age Babies	1970	9	6	25
Depression Kids	1980	8	6	33
War Babies	1990	8	5	40
Early Boomers	2000	9	5	38
<b>At ages 35–43</b>				
Early Boomers	1990	9	7	28
Late Boomers	2000	12	7	26

Note: Near poverty is 150 percent of the poverty threshold. Affluence is 500 percent of the poverty threshold.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Micro-data Series (IPUMS), 2003.

**Rising Affluence and Rising Poverty**

The increase in household income inequality among boomers is visible also by examining changes at the extremes of the household income distribution (see Table 12). Poverty and affluence represent these extremes. The U.S. Census measures poverty by matching the total household money income from all sources before taxes to estimates of need based on family size and ages of family members (adjusted annually for inflation). If total household income falls below estimated need, the family is in poverty. Some scholars also examine families who are at or below 150 percent of the poverty threshold and are at high risk of falling into poverty. A common measure of affluence that permits comparisons across cohorts and over time is 500 percent of the poverty level, generally above the 80th percentile of the income distribution.

Poverty rates for people in midlife are generally lower than for the general population. The faces of poverty in the United States are primarily those of young children, the elderly, and disadvantaged ethnic groups. In 2000, the national poverty rate was 11 percent, higher than those for the War Babies and early boomers but lower than that of the late boomers.

The highest rate of poverty and the lowest rate of affluence were experienced at midlife by the Young Progressives: Nearly one in five was officially poor and one in four was near poverty. The discovery of this stark level of poverty across all age groups motivated the War on Poverty and related social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid. The effect was that, a decade later, poverty rates had fallen to half their 1960 levels. Poverty levels then remained relatively constant across cohorts.

However, between ages 35 and 44, the late boomers are significantly more at risk of poverty and near

poverty than the three previous cohorts. In fact, the late boomers have the highest levels of poverty of any cohort since the Young Progressives. One in 10 late boomers is in poverty at middle age, while two in 10 are in poverty or at risk of poverty.

Household incomes that reach affluent levels (500 percent above the poverty threshold) are most likely to occur in mature households, which have benefited from career wage growth. These levels increased across 20th-century cohorts, peaked with the War Babies, but fell somewhat among the early boomers. Affluence increased by 10 percentage points among the early boomers between 1990 and 2000. Meanwhile, late boomers had slightly lower affluence levels than early boomers at the same ages—coupled with higher poverty rates.

**Ethnic Classes and Power Couples**

Household income inequality in the boomer cohorts is crosscut by income inequality between subgroups of boomers. We see the persistence of income inequality by race, ethnicity, and nativity. These differences are so entrenched that in effect they create ethnic classes. In addition, however, a new basis for inequality has emerged among boomers: the combination of education and marital status.

Earlier we showed a divergence across cohorts in the likelihood of college completion by race/ethnicity and nativity. We saw persistent differences by race, ethnicity, and nativity in occupational mobility and wage growth. Household structure also varies among ethnic groups, with more single family heads among blacks and more married couples among U.S.-born Asians. These differences have produced enduring ethnic classes across cohorts. The cumulative effects of differences in education, occupation, and household structure have maintained the relative advantage in household income of non-Hispanic white and Asian groups compared with other groups. These intractable inequalities underlie some of the increased inequality in household income in the boomer cohorts.

Table 13 (page 24) reports household incomes of race, ethnic, and nativity groups as a percent of non-Hispanic white household incomes. The patterns of difference are diverse and dramatic. Blacks' household incomes have been about two-thirds of non-Hispanic whites since the War Babies, clearly showing little gain. On the other hand, U.S.-born Hispanics have gained relative to whites, especially in the boomer cohorts. U.S.-born Hispanic households have four-fifths the incomes of white households. Hispanic immigrants have lost ground across cohorts and are at the level of blacks. Asians have fared much better. U.S.-born Asians' household incomes exceed whites, while foreign-born Asians achieved parity with whites beginning with the Depression Kids.

Table 13

**HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF SELECTED RACE AND NATIVITY GROUPS COMPARED WITH NON-HISPANIC WHITE INCOME, BY COHORT**

Cohort	Year*	Household income as percent of non-Hispanic white household income				
		U.S-born	U.S-born	Foreign-born	U.S-born	Foreign-born
		Blacks	Hispanics	Hispanics	Asians	Asians
Jazz Age Babies	1970	59	71	71	115	87
Depression Kids	1980	63	72	70	118	95
War Babies	1990	67	70	69	126	104
Early Boomers	2000	66	77	66	121	99
Late Boomers	2000	68	80	66	124	104

\* Cohort members were ages 44–53 in the year given, except for late boomers, who were ages 35–43 in 2000.

Source: Authors' estimates using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

The boomer cohorts came of age after the changes initiated by the Civil Rights Act. However, we see little evidence of the equalization intended by this legislation in household income with respect to race. Blacks in the boomer cohorts are no better off relative to whites than their parents and grandparents.

Ethnic classes in the baby-boom cohorts are not new. What is new is a pattern of income inequality by education and marital status. Households with multiple earners are at a significant advantage in household income. If both of these earners have college degrees, the advantage is of course increased. Table 14 reports percentage differences in income between marital groups by educational levels. With the exception of the Depression Kids, the divergence of household income by marital status and education is pronounced. These inequalities are bolstered by the high likelihood that married couples will have the same level of education.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, in the boomer cohorts, marriage is more likely and perhaps more stable among college-educated people.<sup>64</sup> Together these trends signal an important shift

in the boomer cohorts: Marriage is becoming a class status as well as a family status.

**A Home of One's Own**

In the United States, owning one's home is a widely shared symbol of social and material success. Surveys show that the overwhelming majority of Americans desire to own their own homes. This remarkable consensus on the importance of property ownership reflects deep cultural values of individualism and self-sufficiency. Homeownership is key to financial well-being; home equity commonly accounts for the largest share of one's net worth.<sup>65</sup> Beyond financial advantages, ownership benefits the family and children by anchoring family lifestyle. Ownership has positive effects on the community through increased social integration and civic engagement.<sup>66</sup>

In keeping with the importance of homeownership to Americans, rates of ownership are higher in the United States than those in most other developed

Table 14

**DIFFERENCES IN HOUSEHOLD INCOME BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE GRADUATES, BY MARITAL STATUS AND COHORT**

Education and marital status	Ages 44–53					Ages 35–43	
	Young	Jazz Age	Depression	War	Early	Early	Late
	Progressives 1960	Babies 1970	Kids 1980	Babies 1990	Boomers 2000	Boomers 1990	Boomers 2000
Married college graduates' income as a percentage of married high school graduates' income	149	149	141	159	168	153	167
Unmarried college graduates' income as a percentage of unmarried high school graduates' income	138	155	152	164	168	158	165
Married college graduates' income as a percentage of unmarried college graduates' income	165	164	171	176	179	157	158

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), 2003.

Table 15

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO OWN THEIR HOMES, BY AGE GROUP AND COHORT**

Cohort	Ages 35–43	Ages 44–53
Young Progressives	—	64
Jazz Age Babies	62	71
Depression Kids	68	77
War Babies	71	74
Early Boomers	64	71
Late Boomers	61	—

— Not available.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Integrated Public Use Micro-data Series (IPUMS), 2003.

nations. In fact, homeownership is one of the post-World War II success stories in the United States. Home ownership rates increased dramatically between 1940 and 1960. These increases were due in part to the favorable economic situation. But they also reflected a policy environment supportive of ownership, including programs that subsidized the construction of suburban single-family homes, favorable tax treatment for homeowners, and institutions designed to facilitate mortgage lending.<sup>67</sup>

The Young Progressives, Jazz Age Babies, and Depression Kids capitalized on this environment. The prevalence of homeownership increased in each of these cohorts (see Table 15). However, this favorable trend ended with the War Babies, who were less likely to be owners than the Depression Kids were at the same age. Early and late boomers are even less likely to be homeowners.

Some of the decline in homeownership can be traced to the characteristics of the boomers. A higher percentage of them are minorities and immigrants. Despite increases in the overall likelihood of ownership, significant disparities reflect both economic inequality and outright discrimination in housing markets.<sup>68</sup> However, this downward trend is visible in all racial and ethnic groups, including non-Hispanic whites.

Shifts in family composition also account for some of the decline. Married couples are most likely to be homeowners. Delayed marriage, cohabitation, and divorce (where at least one former partner loses the house), mean that the boomer cohorts are more likely to be living in situations not associated with homeownership.

A final explanation for the boomer shortfall in ownership is that the same difficult economic circumstances that have increased income inequality have affected wealth accumulation. Since the mid-1970s, prospective homeowners have been caught between stagnant wages on one side and rising housing prices on the other. Increases in housing costs have come from both housing price inflation, which some scholars have argued is due

to the large baby-boom cohorts entering the housing market, and an increase in the overall quality of the housing stock.<sup>69</sup> Lower-income people have thus effectively been priced out of the ownership market.<sup>70</sup> The downward trend in ownership rates between the Depression Kids and late boomers is strongest among people with either high school or less than high school educations (29 percent and 17 percent, respectively). The decline is modest for college-educated people (2 percent). Education differentials in home ownership have therefore widened considerably. Among the Depression Kids, the high school graduate ownership rate was 2 percent lower than the college graduate rate. Among late boomers, the comparable figure is 17 percent.

The effects of new family patterns, stagnating wages, and housing price inflation have combined to increase inequality in home ownership in the boomer cohorts. The decline in homeownership signals a new era in which a significant proportion of the population is shut out of the American Dream.

### Unequal Fortunes

Considerable research using sources other than census data has considered how much wealth baby boomers accumulated over their lifetimes. Some studies have found that, on average, the boomers have been wealthier at younger ages (ages 25 to 34 and 35 to 44) than their parents were at those ages. Early boomers have also been compared to current retirees and found to be relatively better off prior to retirement than the currently retired were. The conclusions from these studies are that the boomers are not—and probably will not be in old age—worse off than their parents.<sup>71</sup> Other studies have found that boomers are not saving enough for their retirements. These cohorts have accumulated more wealth over their lifetimes with high average levels of consumption. However, their savings behavior has not included as much traditional savings in bank accounts but more wealth accumulation in home equity and pension accounts—although these are unequally distributed in these cohorts. Moreover, their high levels of secured and unsecured debt raise some concerns about whether they are prepared for retirement.

The decennial census does not collect data that allow comparison of wealth across cohorts, and no other data source is available to compare all cohorts of interest in this study. But other surveys can provide a picture of the wealth of boomer cohorts. We used the Surveys of Income and Program Participation in 1986 and 1996 to review boomer wealth at midlife (see Table 16, page 26).

Table 16 summarizes the average levels of selected components of wealth and debt and the degree of wealth inequality among the boomer cohorts. At ages 31 to 40, the older cohort was more affluent (in constant dollars) than the younger cohort, having both higher

Table 16

## WEALTH AND DEBT OF TWO BABY-BOOM COHORTS, 1986 AND 1996

Indicators of wealth	Ages 31-40						Ages 41-50		
	Early Boomers			Late Boomers			Early Boomers		
	Mean	Median	Gini inequality index*	Mean	Median	Gini inequality index*	Mean	Median	Gini inequality index*
Total net worth, in 1989 dollars	\$68,877	\$34,269	0.66	\$52,719	\$15,799	0.78	\$104,623	\$43,195	0.74
Total wealth	72,532	37,703	0.63	59,911	20,634	0.74	109,406	47,396	0.70
Total debt	42,929	23,587	0.61	62,136	37,224	0.65	44,697	19,800	0.66
<b>Selected sources of wealth</b>									
Home equity	\$34,048	\$17,010	0.66	\$25,594	\$13,000	0.71	\$41,546	\$23,760	0.67
Stock equity**	3,109	0	0.96	3,626	0	0.97	26,960	0	0.95
Other savings	7,839	1,133	0.80	6,148	367	0.86	13,293	1,077	0.85

\* Gini coefficients index the degree of inequality in the distribution of wealth: 0 represents no inequality, while 1 represents maximum inequality. The Gini coefficients exclude people who do not have any of the asset in question.

\*\* Excludes pension plan stock investments. Between 18 percent and 27 percent of cohort members owned stocks.

Source: Authors' calculations using the Surveys of Income and Program Participation, 1986 and 1996.

levels of wealth and lower levels of debt. The median net worth of early boomers in their 30s was almost twice that of late boomers. Early-boomers' assets exceed late-boomers' assets with the exception of average equity in stocks.

Late boomers display higher levels of inequality. The inequality is first evident in the difference between mean and median wealth levels, which show (as in the cases of earnings and household income presented earlier) that wealth is highly concentrated above the median in these cohorts, and especially among the younger one. Inequality is also measured by Gini coefficients, which index the degree of inequality in the distribution of wealth: zero represents no inequality, while 1 represents maximum inequality. The late boomers are more unequal in wealth, net worth, and home equity.

Finally, when we compare the early boomers over 10 years between 1986 and 1996, we see that inequality has increased among them. Average wealth and net worth have increased for the boomers and debt has declined. But inequality in wealth and net worth have increased.

### The Top Takes All

The highly skewed distribution of wealth in the United States is well established.<sup>72</sup> The most recent findings (2001) using the Survey of Consumer Finances' comprehensive estimates of wealth are that the top 1 percent of the population held one-third of total wealth; the next 9 percent in the highest decile held one-third; and the remaining 90 percent of the population held one-third.<sup>73</sup> Wealth distributions in boomer cohorts are less highly

skewed but nevertheless highly unequal. Based on our analyses using the Surveys of Income and Program Participation, the top 10 percent of early boomers hold 54 percent of total cohort wealth in 1996, and the top 10 percent of late boomers hold 59 percent of total cohort wealth. In both cohorts nearly all wealth (at or over 95 percent) is held by those above the medians of the respective wealth distributions.

In sum, the boomer cohorts have on average higher standards of living than earlier cohorts. However, these averages conceal high levels of economic inequality, levels higher than those in the cohorts immediately preceding them. These inequalities reflect the accumulation of education, work, and family histories. The late boomers exhibit more inequality because their journey through the last three decades has been somewhat more treacherous in the labor market and more heterogeneous in family life. The extent to which the economic highs and lows of the 1990s will have permanent effects on boomer wealth levels is yet to be determined. But we can be certain that heterogeneity and inequality will follow them.

### WHAT'S AHEAD

We have called the baby-boom cohorts pivotal because, while their lives are rooted in the past, in most respects they point toward the future. The boomers inherited a society with a strong tradition of universal education and a modern industrial economy. Most grew up in traditional breadwinner families. As they grew up they encountered structural changes that transformed the economy, civil society, and culture.

Their choices negotiated between traditions from the past and the volatile present. As they responded to new circumstances, boomers redirected social change. More than any other cohort, they represent the transition from an old America to a new America.

As pivotal cohorts, the boomers show continuities with past cohorts, but also many discontinuities. On average, they received more education than prior cohorts; they were more likely to work in technical or service jobs; and they were more likely to marry late, divorce, and have few children. But these averages conceal great variation. In almost every respect, the boomer cohorts are more heterogeneous than prior cohorts and they are highly unequal in economic status.

Although the boomers are still in their prime working years, their later years are visible on the horizon. The prospect of the baby-boom cohorts entering later life has raised concerns among academics, policy-makers, and the public. Most of this concern is based on the sheer size of the boomer cohorts. Just as the baby boom once crowded public schools, some observers caution that they will overwhelm public programs for the elderly, notably Social Security and Medicare. Others warn of a tremendous impact of aging boomers on the health care system, and fear that their long-term care will strain social and familial resources. Although the aging of the baby boom should lead to vibrant markets for products for the elderly, some marketers dread the boomers' exit from the high-income, high-spending midlife years. Other analysts predict declines in American productivity as retiring boomers shrink the labor force. Some commentators even worry that the withdrawal of the boomers from housing and equity markets will cause a meltdown in housing and stock prices.

The impact of the aging baby boom depends greatly on the current circumstances and future choices of the boomers themselves. As we have seen, the baby-boom cohorts enter old age with life histories that differ markedly from those of current elderly. Boomer men and women have worked longer and many plan to work later than earlier cohorts. Most boomers will confront the disabilities associated with aging later in their lives than earlier cohorts. And their diverse family histories and current living arrangements raise more uncertainties about the patterns of their lives in old age. The boomers have surprised us before. Will they surprise us again? Given these differences, projections based on size alone are not likely to be helpful. Indeed, the variability in the boomer cohorts that we have discovered promises that generalizations are likely to be misleading.

Based on our review of the boomers lives and times, what can we add to the debate about the impact of aging boomers? On the one hand, the boomers' status at midlife provides a rough map to their future because

the life course is sequentially dependent: Later events and statuses are conditional on earlier events and statuses. Consequently, their old age will reflect the accumulation of experiences. For example, their marital histories will shape their family relationships in later life. Similarly, their education and earnings histories will be an important determinant of their economic well-being. We also know where the boomers are continuous and where they are discontinuous with prior cohorts. To the extent that the boomers are continuous with past cohorts, differences between the boomers and current elderly will be a matter of degree. The experience of current elderly, and especially the experience of the War Babies, can provide useful clues about what to expect from the boomers.

On the other hand, reviewing the history of the baby boom has demonstrated the tremendous flexibility of individual biography. For example, the baby boom was itself a response to historical conditions. Their lives unfolded as responses to contemporaneous changes. At midlife, their most recent experiences have included the 1990s economic boom and bust, the War on Terror, and continuing technological change. How these experiences and experiences to come will bear upon their futures is not yet clear. Since we cannot predict historical change, conclusions about the future of the baby boom are not wise.

With this caveat, the following is a set of reasonable expectations for the aging of the baby boom.

## The Extension of Midlife

Based on the patterns we observe in their lives to this point, we expect that the boomers will extend midlife well into what used to be considered old age. The organization of their lives has already deviated considerably from what was once considered normative. New roles and differences in the timing of roles have led to new life trajectories that will continue to develop and perhaps move in new directions as they grow old.

## Longer Working Lives

A number of factors point to boomer men and women working later in their lives than previous cohorts. First, they have worked in less hazardous and less physically demanding occupations that have traditionally had later ages of retirement. Second, across all levels of education, their employment histories have been less stable due to labor market changes, which have slowed their progress in saving for retirement. Third, some boomers will continue to work because they are satisfied with their jobs, their incomes, and the lifestyles these afford. Others will continue to work from economic necessity. Finally, a number of structural changes will likely lead to longer work lives among the boomers. Chief among these changes will be disincentives to retire early.

### Complex Family Lives

We have shown the enormous heterogeneity in the boomers' family lives. These family histories suggest that the boomers will extend midlife family roles and relationships beyond the middle years. For example, boomers who have had children later in life will find that some parental responsibilities, such as coresidence with children or paying for college, will extend to older ages than in previous cohorts. Longer lives among the boomers' parents may mean that older boomers will be caring for their very old parents.

### Healthy and Active Lives

The image of old age often includes the disengagement of older people from lifelong interests and activities, implying that old age is a discreet, discontinuous stage. This image may never have been completely true, but among boomers it seems especially unlikely. The combination of better health and heterogeneous lives suggests that boomers will remain actively engaged in all dimensions of their lives and push back the boundaries of old age.

### Golden Years or Tarnished Years?

Our analyses demonstrate the enormous inequalities in the baby-boom cohorts at midlife. These inequalities mean that while some boomers will have a comfortable old age, others will not. The boomers are generally better off than earlier cohorts, but the high dispersion of income and wealth among them will persist into retirement. Also, boomers are generally healthier than earlier cohorts, but health disparities among them will probably lead to diverging trajectories of disability in old age. These inequalities coincide with policy changes that may make things worse.

### Persistent Inequality

Persistent economic inequalities combined with health disparities will mean that the least well off may face higher risks of unemployment and earlier and more protracted declines in health. Economic inequality among the boomers will coincide with policy changes that encourage them to remain at work later, further disadvantaging those who are least advantaged. Early retirement is common among lower-wage and disabled workers. However, the Social Security system has already altered the eligibility rules for the boomers in ways that will penalize earlier retirement and reward later retirement at higher levels than earlier cohorts. Recent increases in the federal deficit have fueled additional concerns over the financial burden of boomer retirees and raised the prospect of further adjustments that will again cut benefits for the boomers. The easiest way to cut benefits is to postpone them. These kinds of adjustments work to increase the relative disadvantage of boomers with lower incomes.

Less-advantaged boomer workers will encounter the same problems that current older workers encounter. Those who retire early become progressively worse off with time, but working later may also be problematic. Unemployment and underemployment are higher for less-skilled older workers; and jobs are low in pay and benefit coverage. Health insurance is becoming more scarce and expensive for older workers who hang on as long as they can until Medicare eligibility. The poorest among them are uninsured and turn to disability coverage under Social Security if possible.

### The Devolution of Risk

Economic and health risks largely devolve on families and individuals and will do so even more in the boomer cohorts. Economic inequality and health disparities have coincided with changes in workplace provisions for pension saving and health insurance over the past two decades. Individuals and their families are increasingly responsible for retirement saving in risky financial markets and for the provision of health care, both through higher out-of-pocket costs and through the personal provision of care.

In this environment, some boomers will do fine, but others will be vulnerable to economic and health risks and to devastating consequences from lack of an adequate safety net. Risks will be highest for people with fewer resources and reserves. However, the importance of family members in sharing risk means that variations in family structure will affect the kinds of safety nets available. For example, much speculation has centered on the old-age prospects for "absent" fathers. Lacking strong bonds with children, many fear that these men will be left alone in old age. Similar issues arise for people who have never married or never had children. New family situations and configurations with ambiguous expectations or strained relations may weaken the family safety net.

Family histories will have an enduring impact well into old age. The oldest old (those 85 and over) are most in need of long-term care and most at risk for poverty. They will be especially vulnerable to variations in the family safety net. These issues will loom particularly large for women, who typically live much longer than men.

### The Challenges of Diversity

More than any cohort before them, the boomers represent the diversification of American society. The boomers differ from each other in the kinds of education they received, the kinds of work they do, and the kinds of families they live in. These patterns are often crosscut by race, ethnicity, and nativity. They culminate in socioeconomic inequality. This diversity will continue to challenge the boomers.



## Making Sense of Lives

The boomers have replaced the traditional life course with a varied set of trajectories. Not only are old rules obsolete, variability in lives means that they have not been replaced with new rules. The boomers lack standards for evaluating success and life satisfaction. Part of their project in midlife and old age will include the creation of these standards.

## Potential Policy Mismatches

Social policy is typically based on assessments of the average experience in the population. Such an approach will be problematic with the boomer cohorts. Their diverse experiences will challenge policymakers to avoid enacting universal policies that create more problems than they solve. For example, health policies built on the assumption that family members are available to care for older people will not fit with the family circumstances of many boomers.

## Different Life Worlds

Differences in life experiences create different life worlds. Life worlds in turn frame identities, values, and allegiances that are transmitted to younger generations. A multiplicity of life worlds can enrich society and promote tolerance and generosity. However, living in separate worlds can also lead to insulation and distance from others. These barriers can undermine social solidarity and lead to mistrust. They can also lead the boomer cohorts to underestimate their common interest to act collectively on their own behalf.

## EPILOGUE

This report has centered on the experience of the baby boomers, but many of the issues raised as boomer issues are relevant to the entire American society. The best evidence suggests that succeeding cohorts are following patterns set by the boomers. Educational inequality has not abated and may even have increased. The workplace has become even more unpredictable for young workers entering the labor market. Younger cohorts have inherited the family complexity of the boomers. Diversity in the boomer cohort, while pronounced compared with earlier cohorts, is only a taste of what is to come. What is certain is that their past is our past and their future is our future.

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