

The Public Renders a Split Verdict On Changes in Family Structure

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Overview

The American public is sharply divided in its judgments about the sweeping changes in the structure of the American family that have unfolded over the past half century. About a third generally accepts the changes, a third is tolerant but skeptical and a third considers them bad for society.

This finding emerges from an analysis that the Pew Research Center conducted of responses to a survey in which a nationally representative sample of 2,691 adults were asked whether they considered the following seven trends to be good, bad or of no consequence to society: more unmarried couples raising children; more gay and lesbian couples raising children; more single women having children without a male partner to help raise them; more people living together without getting married; more mothers of young children working outside the home; more people of different races marrying each other; and more women not ever having children.

About a third (31%) of survey respondents are **Accepters**. Anywhere from half to two-thirds of this group say these trends make no difference to society. But of the remainder who express an opinion, more say that most of the trends are good than say they are bad. Women, Hispanics, East Coast residents and adults who seldom or never attend religious services are more likely than others to be represented in this group.

A similar share of the public (32%) rejects virtually every trend that the Accepters tolerate or endorse. A majority say five of the seven changes are bad for society; the only trends they generally accept are interracial marriage and fewer women having children. They are the only group in which a majority (61%) says it is harmful for mothers of small children to work outside the home. Whites, older adults, Republicans, the religiously observant and married adults are overrepresented in this group. They are the **Rejecters**.

The third and somewhat larger group (37%) are the **Skeptics**.¹ While they generally share most of the tolerant views of the Accepters, they also express concern about the impact of these trends on society. On one of the trends -- single motherhood -- they and the Accepters have stark differences. Virtually all Skeptics say mothers having children without male partners to help raise them is bad for society. Among Accepters, just 2% say this. When asked about the six other trends examined in the survey, a majority of Skeptics say each makes no difference or is good for society. Young people, Democrats and political independents, and minorities are disproportionately more likely to be in this group.

The remainder of this report explores these three groups in more detail. The next section examines how the three groups differ from each other on the seven demographic trends included in the survey. The section that follows looks at the demographics of each group, and a final section examines the views of the three groups on other issues.

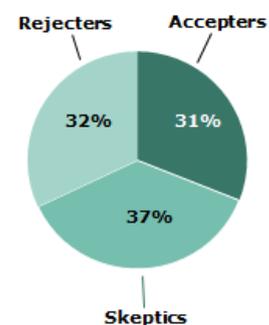
But first, a note about the limitations of this analysis. Not everyone in each cluster evaluates each of the trends in exactly the same way. Overall, however, members of each group are more similar to one another in terms of their responses to the questions than they are to those in the other two groups. Also, while the three clusters described in this report do a good job of summarizing the pattern of responses to these seven questions, our analysis might have produced different results had we used different questions or measured people's judgments in different ways.

Continue [reading the full report](#), including an [interactive survey to see where you fit](#), at pewsocialtrends.org.

1. Labeling this group "Skeptics" does not mean its members disapprove of these trends. In fact, majorities or large pluralities say six of the seven trends have made no difference. But they are less likely than Accepters to express this tolerant view and more likely to judge these trends as bad rather than good. They also overwhelmingly say that single motherhood has hurt society.

Judging the Trends

How the public divides over trends shaping the family



Note: Based on full sample n=2,691
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