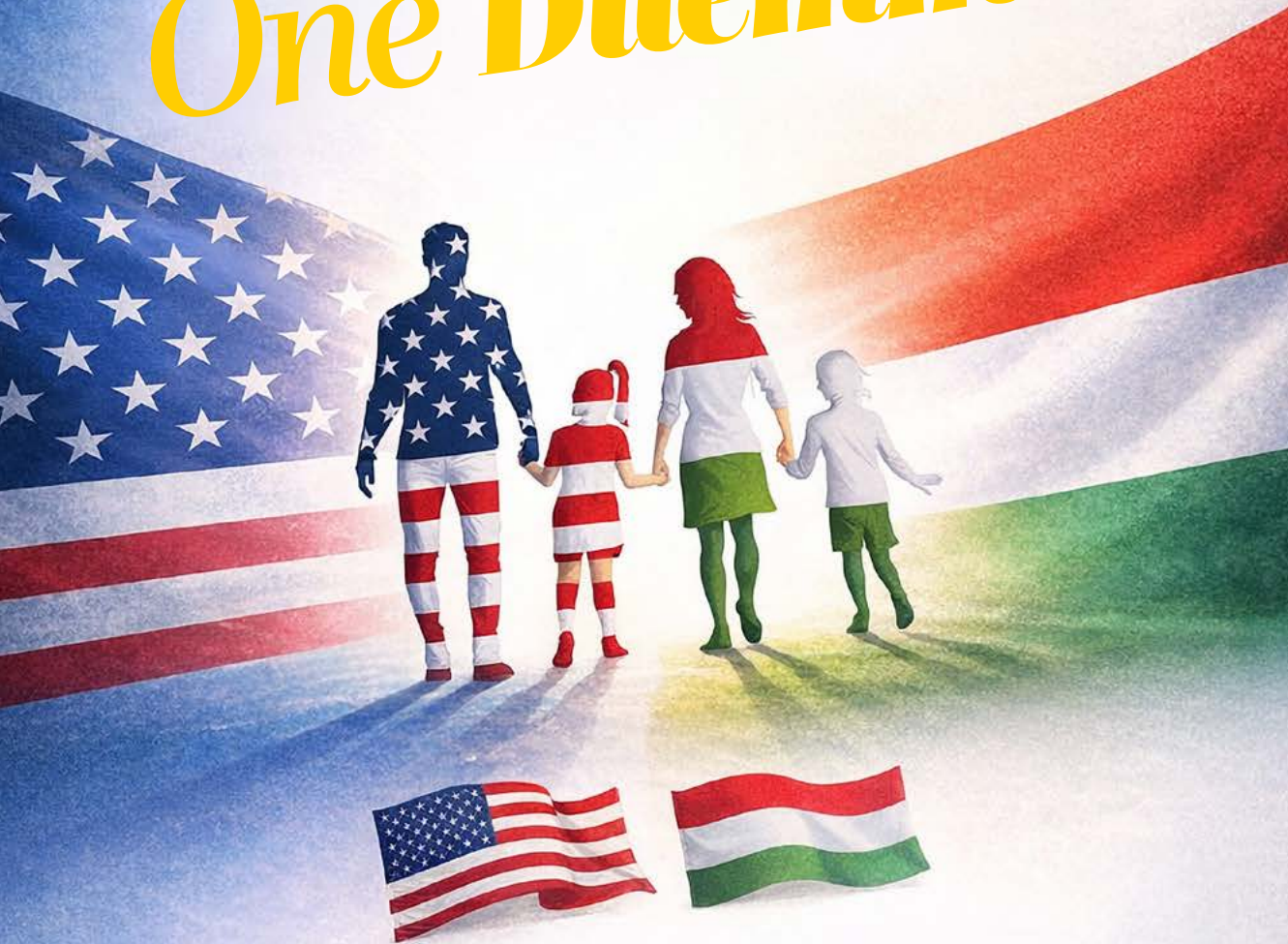


Two Countries, One Dilemma:



**What Young Americans and
Hungarians Actually Think
About Marriage and Children**

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About Marriage and Children**

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Foreword

LEVENTE SZÉKELY

Most of our questions about young people are, by their very nature, oriented toward the future. Whereas worries about the possible consequences of overpopulation once dominated public discourse, attention has increasingly shifted to the weakening—and in some cases the breakdown—of family and community structures, accompanied by declining birth rates among younger generations.

Although young people—often categorized as Generations Y and Z—may appear to form a homogeneous group, prevailing representations of youth are largely shaped from the vantage point of the developed world. To what extent, for instance, do young people in the United States, Europe, or Africa grapple with comparable challenges? While certain fundamental challenges, such as the process of becoming independent, are nearly universal, the broader conditions vary widely. In some regions and social groups, even basic survival remains precarious; in others, young people face markedly different concerns, such as balancing career aspirations with the desire to start a family. International research indicates that, despite differing Maslowian needs, certain trends are evident across societies. One such trend is growing frustration about the future. According to the Safety Perceptions Index, the proportion of people who felt their safety was threatened—without being able to articulate a specific cause—has nearly doubled. This heightened sense of uncertainty is further reflected in the fact that, in more than three-quarters

of the countries surveyed, a majority expressed concerns about unknown threats. Notably, the increase in anxiety about unspecified risks has affected men and women across ages and educational backgrounds at almost identical rates. Although frustration has risen across the board, the youngest age group appears to be the most affected.

In the United States, young people strongly prefer twoparent households with shared responsibilities but still delay family formation due to financial and career priorities. Behind that delay may be a kind of optimism: Despite a difficult 2024, young Americans express a markedly more positive outlook for 2025, and most intend to marry—particularly college educated cohorts—suggesting room for policy and community interventions that lower economic barriers to family formation. Young Hungarians are not so different. They share similar ideals around two-parent families and shared responsibilities. Economic conditions, shifting educational trajectories, and cultural change have extended the youth phase of life, making marriage and childbearing, for most, future-oriented aspirations.

In shaping this report, we analyze the future plans of young people aged 15–39 in Hungary and the United States—an age range that includes the years when most individuals make pivotal decisions about relationships, family, and career. This age group stands at the crossroads of tradition and change, and understanding their



choices is essential to anyone seeking to build resilient communities in a rapidly changing world. Our aim is to compare how Hungarian and American young people perceive their circumstances, what aspirations they hold

for the future, and, within that, their specific intentions regarding family formation. We also seek to understand what types of families they imagine, and what concerns shape their outlook on the future.



Family Formation

GEORGINA KISS-KOZMA – BRENT BUCHANAN –
ALEXANDER TARASCIO

Most of our questions about young people are, by their very nature, oriented toward the future. Whereas worries about the possible consequences of overpopulation once dominated public discourse, attention has increasingly shifted to the weakening—and in some cases the breakdown—of family and community structures, accompanied by declining birth rates among younger generations. This trend is evident in the United States as well. Although the country has a low birth rate, natural population growth continues, as the number of births remains slightly higher than the number of deaths.

In contrast, Europe's demographic situation has long been unfavorable. One of the principal factors contributing to population decline is the decreasing desire to have children, which is rooted in the rapid transformation of childbearing practices. These practices are most strongly influenced by the postponement of childbearing and changes in marital status. Although cohabitation and the diversification of family formations have become increasingly common, the establishment of a family has traditionally begun with marriage. Numerous studies have also demonstrated that individuals who are married report greater satisfaction with their relationship status than those who merely cohabit. An examination of empirical findings shows that two-thirds of young people in both Hungary and the United States wish to live in marriage at some point in their lives.

In both countries, the ideal family model among youth is remarkably consistent: a strong majority of Hungarian respondents (85%) and nearly three-quarters of American youth (72%) consider the presence of both parents essential. Shared

parenting responsibilities are also highly valued, with 81% of Hungarians and 76% of Americans endorsing equal roles for mothers and fathers. Marriage remains a central aspiration, favored by 48% of Hungarian youth and 52% of their American counterparts, though the timing and certainty of these plans differ. The data also indicate that while only 6% of Hungarian young people reported that they definitely do not wish to live in marriage, the proportion of those who completely reject the idea of marriage is nearly twice as high in the United States. However, compared to their Hungarian counterparts, American respondents appear more certain about their future plans: whereas 7% of respondents in the United States were unable to answer, the proportion of uncertain Hungarian youth is nearly twice as large.

Marriage is not the only future aspiration shared by Hungarian and American youth and young adults; most of them also desire lifelong commitment, and a relative majority in both countries regard marriage as the most ideal form of such commitment. Among Hungarian respondents, 67% expressed a desire to

live in a lifelong relationship, while this figure is 68% among American youth. Moreover, whereas nearly four in ten Hungarians (39%) consider marriage the most ideal form of lifelong commitment, this view is held by a majority of Americans (51%). However, practical considerations often shape these aspirations. Financial difficulties are cited as the top personal fear among American youth (32%), and career goal attainment is rated extremely or very important by 68%, a priority that frequently leads to postponement of family formation. Hungarian youth also report similar pressures, with 55% emphasizing the importance of career achievement alongside timely family establishment.

According to the academic literature, numerous factors influence young people's willingness to marry, their family plans, and later the durability of their marriages. One important factor among these is the experience gained from the family of origin. For one-third (34%) of Hungarian young people, their parents' relationship generally serves as an exemplary model, and an even larger proportion (44%) look to their grandparents' marriage as a model. In contrast, American young adults tend to view their parents' rather than their grandparents' relationships and family lives as examples to follow (48% vs. 43%). Yet, when it comes to practical support, American parents are twice as likely as Hungarian parents to rely solely on themselves (40% vs. 20%), reflecting differences in family structure and available resources.

However, relationship counseling—one possible form of intergenerational cooperation—is only partially characteristic of this generation. A majority of Hungarian young people do not rely on relationship advice from either their parents or from closer or more distant relatives (47–57%). American youth are somewhat more likely to seek advice from the older generation in matters of relationships, yet even in this case, those who receive no advice from either parents or extended family members remain in the majority (40–28%).

Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping young people's perspectives on family and relationships. In the United States, YouTube (42%) and TikTok (36%) are the dominant sources of information, while Hungarian youth also report high engagement with digital platforms. These channels not only influence attitudes but also serve as primary spaces for public discussion about family, career, and future plans.

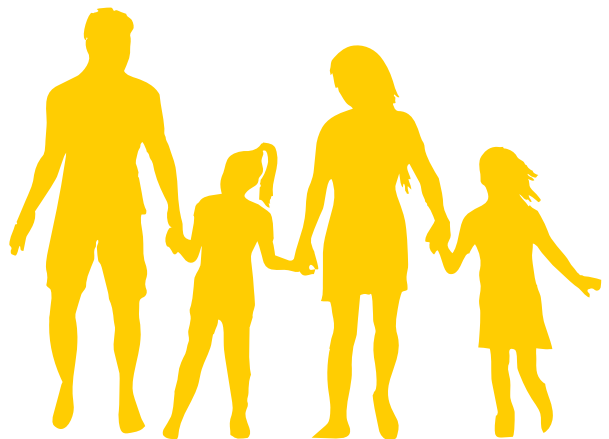
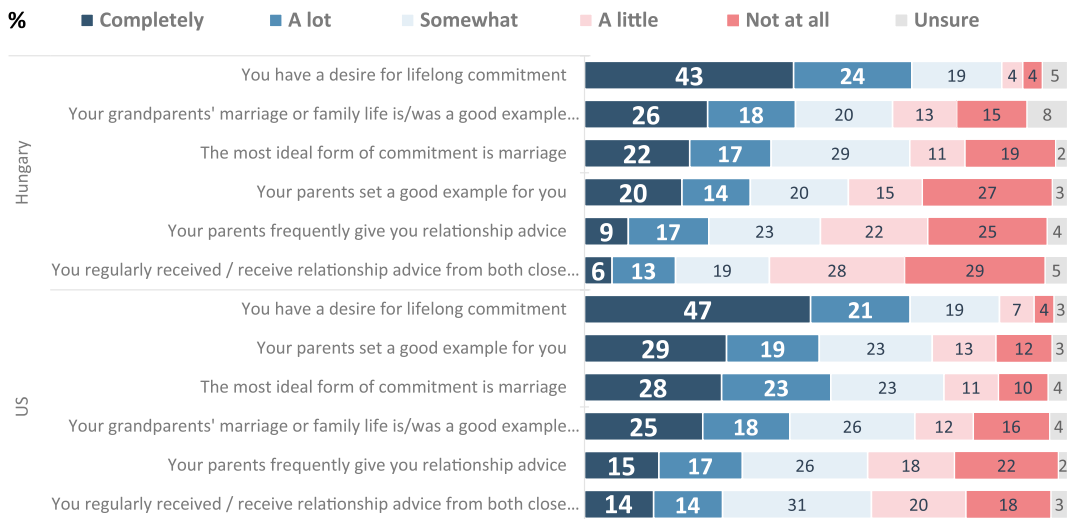


Chart 1. RELATIONSHIP, COMMITMENT



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025

BASE (BOTH): N=1000, YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 /

Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Childbearing in this age group is increasingly delayed, with young people postponing family formation into their 30s. In Hungary, women aged 20–24, previously considered the most fertile age group, had more than two-thirds fewer children between 1990 and 2009. This decline was offset by women in their late 20s and early 30s, whose fertility showed a moderate increase. This paradigm shift occurred rapidly and within a relatively short period. The consequence has been a sharply declining, and subsequently low and stagnant fertility rate and birth numbers. Annual birth statistics reveal a deficit in births among younger mothers. During the 1990s, this shortfall was not compensated at all, and after the turn of the millennium, it was only partially offset by the rising fertility of “older” female age groups. The average age of women at the birth of their first child increased from

23 to over 29 years, meaning that today women begin family formation and childbearing at an age at which, three decades earlier, they had almost completed it.

In the early 1960s, the total fertility rate in the United States was approximately 3.5, declining to 1.7 by the mid-1970s. It then gradually increased to 2.1 by 2007, but has since fallen below 1.6, indicating a long-term declining trend in birth rates in the United States as well. This pattern is particularly pronounced among women under 30, with fertility now higher in the 30–34 age group than among those aged 25–29.

Consequently, it is particularly important to consider young people’s perceptions of the age at which childbearing is feasible. Hungarian and American youth share similar views regarding the age at which

one can make a responsible decision about having children, generally after 22–25 years. However, while Hungarian young people consider the upper limit to be around 40 years, their American counterparts believe that a responsible decision about childbearing can be made even after 45. Nevertheless, postponing childbearing often increases the likelihood that not all desired children will be born.

It is therefore not surprising that, although Hungarian and American young people

aged 15–39 consider the ideal number of children to be more than two (Hungary: 2.11; USA: 2.35), they currently raise fewer than one child on average (Hungary: 0.6; USA: 0.77). Age-group distributions indicate that in Hungary, at least one child is typical only among those over 35, and in the United States among those over 30. What is particularly noteworthy is the discrepancy between ideal and planned family size: young people anticipate having fewer children in the future than they consider ideal (Hungary: 1.74; USA: 2.13).

Chart 2. FAMILY PLANNING ON AVERAGE

Age (yrs)	Number of children at present		Number of planned children		Ideal number of children	
	Hungary (N=989)	US (N=997)	Hungary (N=930)	US (N=980)	Hungary (N=957)	US (N=947)
15-17	0.02	0.16	1.71	2.29	2.3	2.51
18-24	0.16	0.44	1.89	2.2	2.08	2.41
25-29	0.58	0.8	1.95	2.22	2.08	2.4
30-34	0.91	1.07	1.62	2.13	1.96	2.25
35-39	1.07	1.15	1.5	1.89	2.23	2.25
Total	0.6	0.77	1.74	2.13	2.11	2.35

SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025

BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39. Questions¹. AVERAGE

1 Question: How many children are you raising? / In your opinion, what is the ideal number of children in a family? / How many children do you realistically plan to have in your lifetime (including existing children and any children you are expecting)? How many children do you wish you could have in your lifetime (including existing children and any children you are expecting)?

Childbearing is preceded by a complex decision-making process. The literature distinguishes between economic approaches, which primarily examine the financial aspects of the decision to have children, and other perspectives, such as the theory of the Second Demographic

Transition, which emphasizes the significant influence of cultural changes on demographic processes (Lesthaeghe, 2010; 2014).

The youth phase of life has been significantly prolonged and transformed in

recent decades due to major societal changes, including the most recent communication revolution—the rise of digital media culture—globalization, and the era of multiple crises or “polycrisis.” As a result of this extension of youth, many key milestones of adulthood are reached increasingly later, including family formation. Consequently, in what was traditionally understood as the youth phase—between ages 18 and 29—family formation has shifted from an achieved milestone to a future-oriented aspiration. That is, it is not the realized form of family formation that can be examined, but rather how young people envision the ideal family.

Our research findings indicate that, although the demographic data reveal an expansion of cohabitation and a weakening of the institution of marriage—as evidenced by rising divorce rates, the

postponement of marriage, and the celebration of singlehood across social media platforms—the family considered ideal by young people remains the traditional family. Despite some differences in emphasis, young people in both countries share similar views:

In Hungary, respondents consider the ideal family to include both mother and father (85%), with child-rearing responsibilities shared equally between parents (81%). The biological parents cohabit and jointly raise their children (70%), live in marriage (48%), have their first child before age 30 (53%), and have grandparents who actively participate in child-rearing (48%).

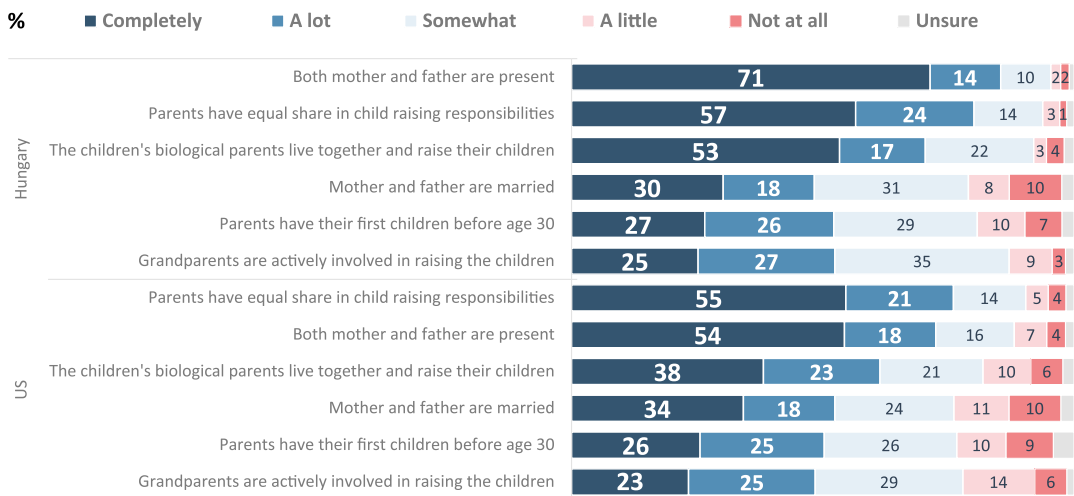
Among American respondents, the ideal family is characterized by equally shared child-rearing responsibilities between parents (76%), the presence of both



mother and father (72%), cohabitation and joint parenting by the biological parents (61%), parental marriage (52%),

having the first child before age 30 (51%), and the grandparents' active involvement in child-rearing (48%).

Chart 3. AN IDEAL FAMILY



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025
 BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 / Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements? In an ideal family...

The expectations of prospective parents largely align with the practical experiences of those already raising children. Parents in Hungary and the United States report meaningful help from extended family in child-rearing – especially in the first months after the birth of a child – yet the pattern of reliance differs. American parents are twice as likely as Hungarian parents to say they must rely only on themselves (about 40% vs. 20%), reflecting differences in proximity to kin, childcare availability, and work-life arrangements.

The proportion of parents reporting active support from grandparents is similar in both countries. In Hungary,

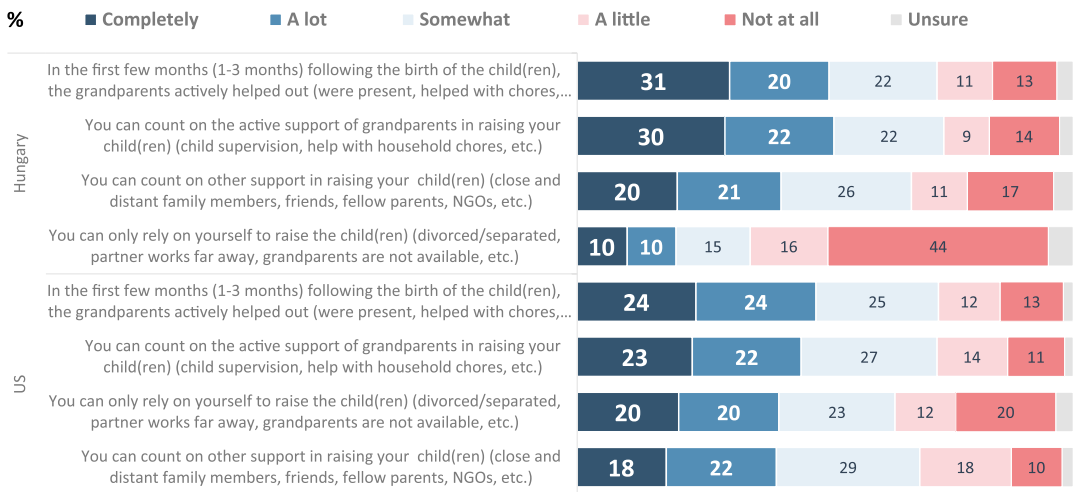
51% of respondents, and in the United States, 48%, confirmed that in the first few months after the birth of their child(ren) (1–3 months), grandparents actively assisted—being present, helping with household tasks, cooking, and so on. Currently, young parents continue to rely on grandparents, extended family, and civil organizations for support in raising children. Roughly every second parent can rely on grandparents (45% in Hungary; 52% in the U.S.), while around two-fifths can count on extended family or civil organizations (40% in Hungary; 41% in the U.S.).

Non-parents share similar ideas about future parenting, particularly in their

expectations of equal partnership between parents, and an expectation of shared responsibilities. At the same time, non-parents in the U.S. are less emphatic about strong grandparent involvement compared to current parents,

instead prioritizing broader support systems that include friends, extended family, and community organizations. This preference tracks with the media environment where practical advice and peer networks are highly visible.

Chart 4. PARENTING IN PRACTICE



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025
 BASE: HU N=347. US N=401. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 WITH CHILDREN / Question: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

The postponement of family formation is also influenced by young people’s perception—on a global scale—that it is important to fully experience their youth before starting a family (Hungary: 64%; USA: 59%) and to see the world (Hungary: 44%; USA: 46%). Somewhat paradoxically, however, both Hungarian and American youth also consider it important to establish a family in a timely manner (Hungary: 60%; USA: 46%), while simultaneously valuing the achievement of their career goals (Hungary: 55%; USA: 68%).

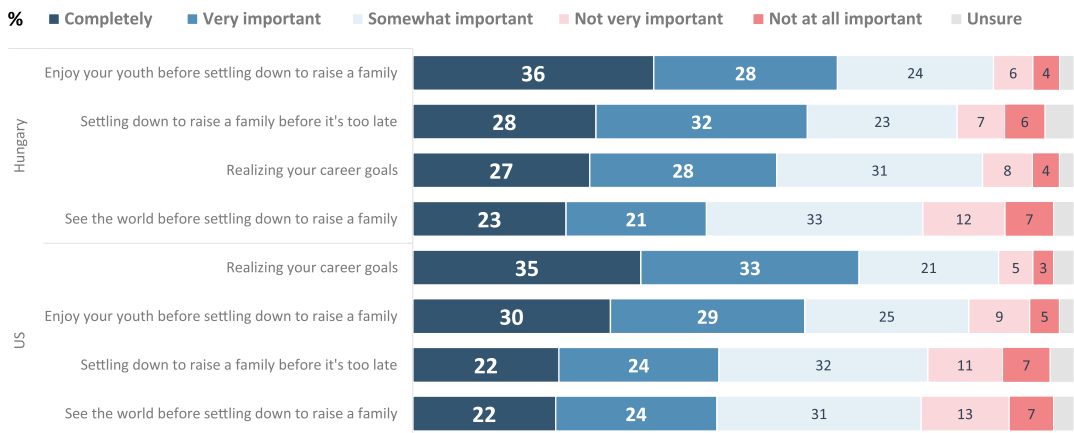
The youth phase of life has not only been extended but also transformed. Compared with previous generations, young people today live and think differently, and their value systems have changed significantly. Alongside local values, global values increasingly influence their lives and ways of thinking. Modern liberal ideologies also exert a strong influence on young people’s ideas about family formation.

This is evident in the following findings, which show that both climate-conscious

ideologies and the spread of deliberate childlessness are particularly pronounced among American youth. Nearly every second American young person (45%) agrees with the statement that they consciously choose not to have children, and one-third (33%) also agree that having fewer children is important for saving the planet. These values are less prevalent among Hungarian respondents (deliberate childlessness: 25%; importance of climate protection: 26%).

At the same time, it is clear that addressing climate change will require increasingly advanced technologies—and thus a growing number of talented young people capable of developing these innovations. Family formation may also be constrained if young people perceive that women must choose between family and career. Among both Hungarian and American youth, around one-fifth (20–22%) consider this a significant challenge for women when planning a family.

Chart 5. FAMILY PLANNING



*SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
 BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED
 15-39 / Question: How important is it to you...?*

This may also be related to the perception among young people that they have sufficient time to have children, even at age 40 or older. At the same time, it is well established that fertility declines sharply with age, which reduces the

likelihood of having all desired children. Therefore, it is particularly important to educate young people and raise their awareness regarding fertility and family formation.



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Future Plans and Perspectives

BRENT BUCHANAN – FANNI RADNAI –
LEVENTE SZÉKELY – ALEXANDER TARASCIO

Today, the life stage commonly referred to as “youth” has been significantly extended—not in biological terms, but in relation to social roles and expectations. Over recent decades, multiple societal transformations have reshaped the structure and pace of young adulthood. The expansion of educational systems has offered young people greater opportunities and raised the overall educational attainment, yet it has also contributed to delays in major life decisions, including the formation of families. Beyond education, additional forces—such as globalization, the rise of digital culture and various economic and geopolitical crises—further influence how young people imagine their futures.

Our previous research found that young people regard uncertainty and an unpredictable future as the most pressing challenges facing their generation (Székely, 2023). In our latest study, we sought to explore perceptions of the future more deeply by examining how young adults interpret both the recent and distant past. For respondents aged 15–39 in Hungary, the year 2024—the “recent past” in our analysis—was more frequently described using terms such as “change”, “difficult”, and “chaos”. A comparison with the responses of young Americans reveals notable parallels: the most common descriptor was “crazy” followed by “good” and “chaos”. Young Americans reported strong optimism about the year ahead even after a difficult 2024: roughly seven in ten describe 2025 in positive terms, and those who strongly believe they will realize their plans rises from about 45% in 2024 to ~55% for 2025.

Agenda-setting theory posits that public thinking is shaped fundamentally by the media—not by dictating what people should think, but by shaping the issues

they think about. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue, the media elevate certain topics to prominence while diminishing the visibility of others. The motivations behind these patterns are often contested, partly because media priorities do not always align with what the public perceives as important. While opinion polls typically measure the importance individuals assign to specific issues, our study employs a different approach. We investigate how 15–39-year-olds in Hungary and the United States perceive shifts in public attention, identifying the topics they feel become disproportionately prominent, and those they believe have faded from the conversation compared with five years earlier.

In both Hungary and the United States, young people report that topics such as artificial intelligence, migration, climate change, and mental health have gained prominence in public discourse over the past five years. These themes increasingly dominate conversations, media coverage, and policymaking, reflecting the central concerns and challenges of the present moment. Notably, when

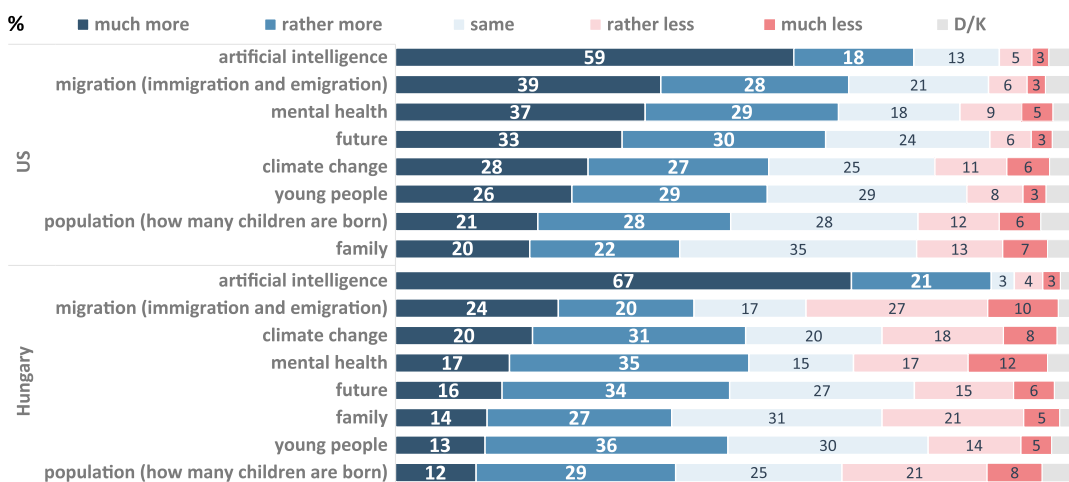
asked to identify the issues most frequently discussed in the public sphere, young people in both countries tend to place topics such as family and demographic trends at the bottom of the list.

When asked how often certain topics arise in public discussions today compared to five years ago, respondents in both countries offered similar assessments. They indicated that artificial intelligence (AI), migration, mental health, climate change and broader considerations about the future are now discussed more frequently than before. Young people observe that these topics appear more often in everyday

conversations as well as in news media and political debates.

In the United States, more than three-quarters of young people stated that AI is discussed more frequently now than five years ago. Nearly 59% reported that it is discussed “much more”, and almost 18% said “a bit more.” Migration, mental health, and issues concerning the future also ranked high, with more than 60% of respondents indicating that these topics arise more often today. Climate change similarly remained prominent, with a majority noticing an increase in how often it is mentioned.

Chart 6. DISCUSSED IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE MORE OR LESS FREQUENTLY THAN 5 YEARS AGO



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025

BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 / Question: In your opinion are the following issues being discussed in the public sphere more or less frequently than 5 years ago?

Hungarian young people offered similar assessments regarding AI, with more than two-thirds (67%) reporting

that it is discussed “much more” than before—a higher proportion than in the United States. Their views on other

topics, however, differs slightly. Mental health and the future are perceived as more visible than in previous years, but the magnitude of this increase is smaller than among U.S. respondents. Approximately half (52%) of Hungarian youth said that mental health is mentioned more frequently today, while 44% indicated that it is discussed the same amount or even less. Climate change also showed only a modest increase in visibility over the past five years, and migration was viewed as a topic now discussed less often than before.

What is particularly notable is how low family and population-related topics ranked in both countries. In the United States only a minority of young people reported that these issues receive more attention today. Topics such as birth rates and family life are seen as less

frequently discussed than broader global concerns. In Hungary, only about 14% of young people said that family-related issues arise “much more” often in public discussions, while more than one-quarter stated that such topics are discussed less than before. A similar pattern appears regarding discussions of fertility and the number of children being born.

These patterns reveal much about how young people perceive the relative importance of various public issues. Even more revealing, however, are the topics they believe should receive greater attention. In Hungary, young people expressed a desire for more public discourse on the future, mental health, and family-related issues. Respondents in the United States likewise emphasized mental health and future-oriented concerns as priorities, while also expressing

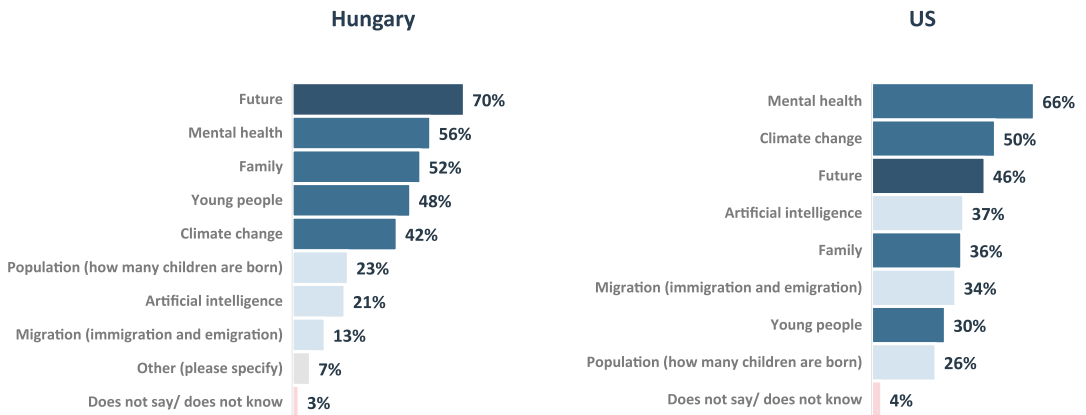


interest in expanded discussion of climate change.

Taken together, these responses suggest that although certain global issues

dominate media coverage and political narratives, others—particularly those related to personal well-being and long-term life plans—may warrant greater public attention.

Chart 7. TOPICS THAT SHOULD BE DISCUSSED MORE FREQUENTLY IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE



*SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2025
BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 / Question:
In your opinion, which topics should be discussed more in the public sphere?*

In Hungary, when asked which topics should receive greater attention in the public sphere, more than half of young people called for increased discussion of mental health and family—two areas they believe currently receive insufficient media attention. Nearly 70% of Hungarian respondents said that the future deserves more focus, followed by mental health (56%) and family (52%). By contrast, artificial intelligence and migration ranked near the bottom of the list of topics that young people felt should be discussed more often. Only 21% of young Hungarians expressed a desire

for more public discourse on AI, and just 13% identified migration as a topic warranting greater attention.

A similar pattern emerges in the United States, where mental health was identified as the highest priority (66%), with climate change (50%) and future prospects (46%) also ranking prominently. Interest in AI and migration is higher in the United States than in Hungary, yet mental health clearly stands out as the issue most young people believe should be discussed more openly. Family- and population-related issues, although not at the top of the list, are nonetheless

seen in both countries as deserving more attention than they currently receive.

These responses highlight an important gap. According to young people's perceptions, global and urgent issues such as artificial intelligence and migration often dominate media coverage and political discourse, yet young people themselves are seeking more discussion on personal well-being and long-term life trajectories. These findings suggest that many young people feel that essential aspects of their lives, such as emotional well-being, long-term stability, and plans for forming a family, are underrepresented in public discussions. While media narratives frequently focus on rapidly changing or global-scale issues, many young people appear to be seeking deeper and more personal conversations related to how they envision their own futures.

When ranking personal priorities, American respondents emphasize career goals more than settling down, with about two-thirds rating career achievement as extremely or very important. Hungarian youth likewise value career attainment but to a slightly lesser degree, creating different pacing for partnership and childbearing. Despite these pressures, the normative window for beginning a family is broadly shared: respondents in both samples identify the under-30 period as the most responsible time to start having children, even as real-world timing increasingly occurs later.

One possible explanation for the similarity in views between Hungarian and U.S. youth is their shared media environment. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube serve as primary sources of information and spaces for public discussion for young people in both countries. This common digital landscape shapes the issues they encounter, the way these issues are framed, and the topics they regard as most significant.

According to the Youth Research Institute's survey (Kiss-Kozma&Székely, 2023), 90% of 15–39-year-olds in Hungary log into a social media platform at least once a day. Among young people, daily or multiple-times-a-day use was highest for Facebook (82%), followed by YouTube (52%), Instagram (45%), TikTok (44%) and X/Twitter (13%). Based on our 2025 survey, similar patterns apply to Americans aged 15–39. Among sources of information, YouTube is the most important, with 42% ranking it among their top three, followed by TikTok (37%) and Facebook (31%). These trends align with international findings. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 (Newman et al., 2024), 23% of 18–24-year-olds now use TikTok for news, while YouTube remains the leading platform for those under 25. TikTok and Instagram also rank closely behind in news-video consumption, reflecting significantly higher engagement among young people than among older age groups.

While traditional news outlets and political forums may continue to address

subjects such as family policy, demographic trends, and government support programs, these messages often fail to reach younger audiences simply because they are not disseminated on the platforms young people use most frequently. In this sense, the public sphere is not silent on these topics; rather, the communication channels employed are poorly aligned with the media habits of younger generations.

Despite differing cultural and political contexts, young people in both Hungary and the United States consume content from the same globalized digital platforms. These platforms tend to prioritize fast-moving, visually engaging, and emotionally charged content, often focused on topics such as mental health, climate anxiety, or technological developments. In contrast, discussions of family formation, fertility trends, or long-term societal planning rarely receive comparable attention within these algorithm-driven environments. Consequently, there is a growing need to reconsider how important but less “viral” issues are communicated to younger audiences.



Moreover, young people tend to prefer news that offers opinionated, personal, or subjective perspectives over detached or formal journalism (Sveningsson, 2015). This preference further complicates efforts by traditional platforms to effectively reach younger audiences.

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Young People's Reflections: The Past Year and Expectations for the Year Ahead

BRENT BUCHANAN – FANNI RADNAI –
LEVENTE SZÉKELY – ALEXANDER TARASCIO



To better understand how young people perceive their present circumstances and future prospects, we asked respondents to reflect on their experiences in 2024 and their expectations for 2025. The results reveal a mix of resilience, ambition, and cautious optimism in both countries.

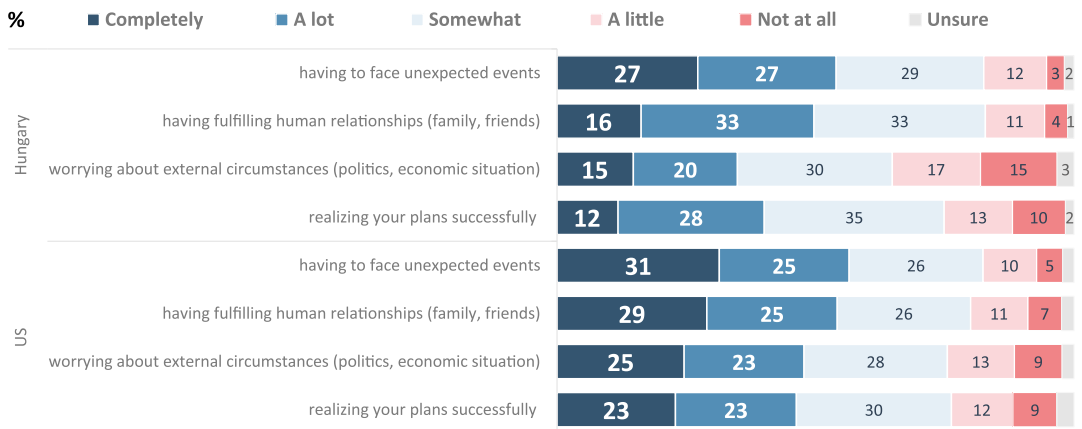
In 2024, more than 80% of Hungarian young people reported having dealt with unexpected events to some extent, and a similar proportion (83%) stated that they had fulfilling relationships with family or friends. At the same time, about 65% were at least somewhat concerned about external factors such as politics or the economy. Nevertheless, three-quarters (75%) indicated they had been able to carry out their plans successfully.

Young people in the United States offered similar assessments. Over 80% said they had encountered unforeseen events during the year, and an equivalent share reported having

strong personal relationships. Roughly three-quarters expressed concerns about political or economic issues, and a comparable proportion said they had managed to follow through on their goals.

Looking ahead to 2025, responses remain optimistic. In Hungary, over two-thirds (67%) of young people believe they will be able to realize their plans either completely or to a large extent. A similar proportion (66%) expect to have fulfilling personal relationships. In the United States, slightly fewer respondents—about 55% and 60%, respectively—shared this outlook on success and relationships.

Chart 8. THIS YEAR (2024) HAS BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY...



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025

BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 /

Question: To what extent has this year (2024) been characterized by...?

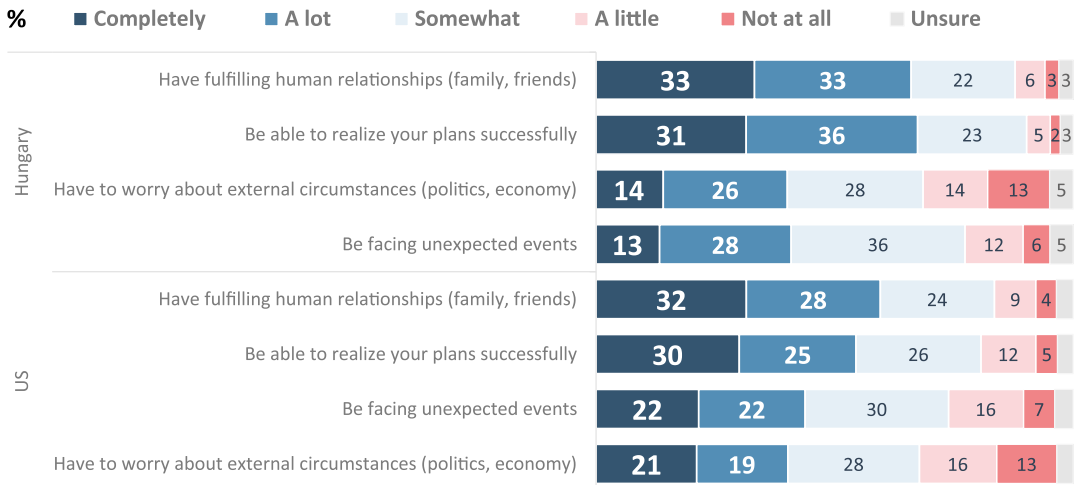
During the research, we also examined in detail the expectations of 15–39-year-olds for the coming year. The expectations of Hungarian respondents are best captured by the word “hope”, although many also mentioned “success”, “expectation” and “progress”. Similarly, Americans aged 15–39 most often mentioned “better”, “hope”, “good” and “exciting”. A closer look at their expectations reveals that a majority of Hungarians surveyed (41%) expect unexpected events. Two-thirds believe their human relationships will be characterized by happiness, and an equal proportion expect their plans to be successfully realized. Americans express similar views: 44% expect unforeseen events in the year ahead, and the majority (60%) anticipate happiness in their personal relationships. A notable difference, however, emerges in expectations regarding the realization of plans. Hungarian respondents are significantly more optimistic, with

two-thirds believing that they will accomplish everything they have planned, compared to 55% of Americans.

Regarding expectations for the future, there are no striking differences within the American sample; however, among Hungarians several statistically significant differences appear across demographic groups. Among 15–39-year-olds, those aged 15–17 are the most optimistic about their friendships and family relationships, with 83% believing that their personal relationships will be characterized by happiness in 2025.



Chart 9. IN THE NEXT YEAR (2025) YOU WILL...



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025
 BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 / Question:
 To what extent do you expect that in the next year (2025) you will ...?

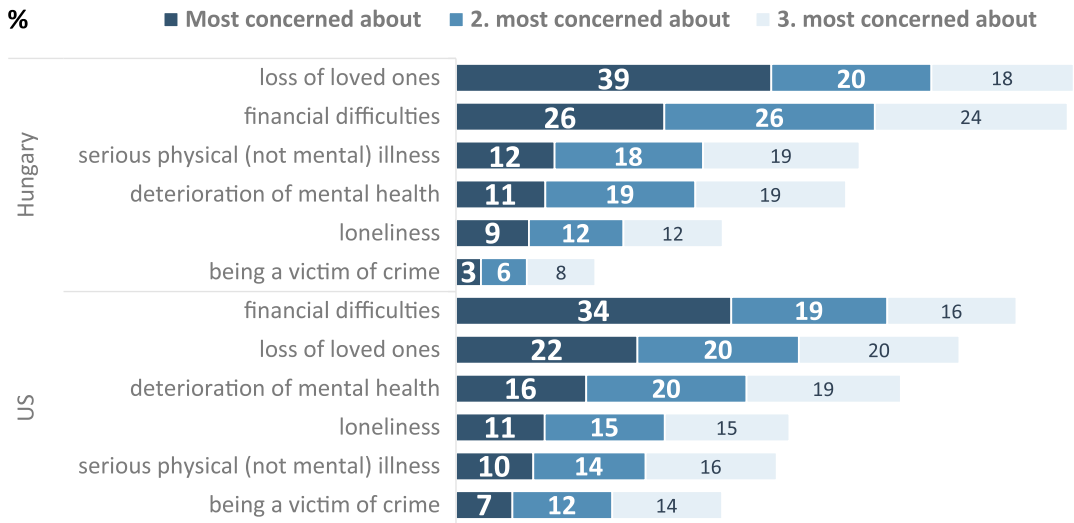
In previous studies, we focused extensively on the fears of young people, asking them to assess potential dangers that commonly appear in imagined future dystopias or that are already relevant today (Székely, 2022; Kiss-Kozma&Székely, 2023). From these studies, we concluded that a potential pandemic and climate change are perceived in similar ways. Young people consider the most alarming aspects of the future to be the next economic crisis and poor governance, whereas fears related to technological developments—such as artificial intelligence or the spread of robotics—are less prominent.

In the present study, we approached the issue differently by dividing potential fears into those related to external circumstances and those tied to personal life. This distinction revealed that negative changes in personal circumstances elicit

much stronger reactions than changes that affect individuals only indirectly. With respect to personal relationships, family-related and financial worries, whereas Americans rank financial problems as their greatest concern, followed by the loss of a loved one. Hungarian respondents are almost equally concerned about physical and mental illness, while Americans express stronger concern about mental health problems. In addition, a higher proportion of American young people selected loneliness and victimization as among the three most alarming issues.



Chart 10. FUTURE PERSONAL CONCERNS



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025

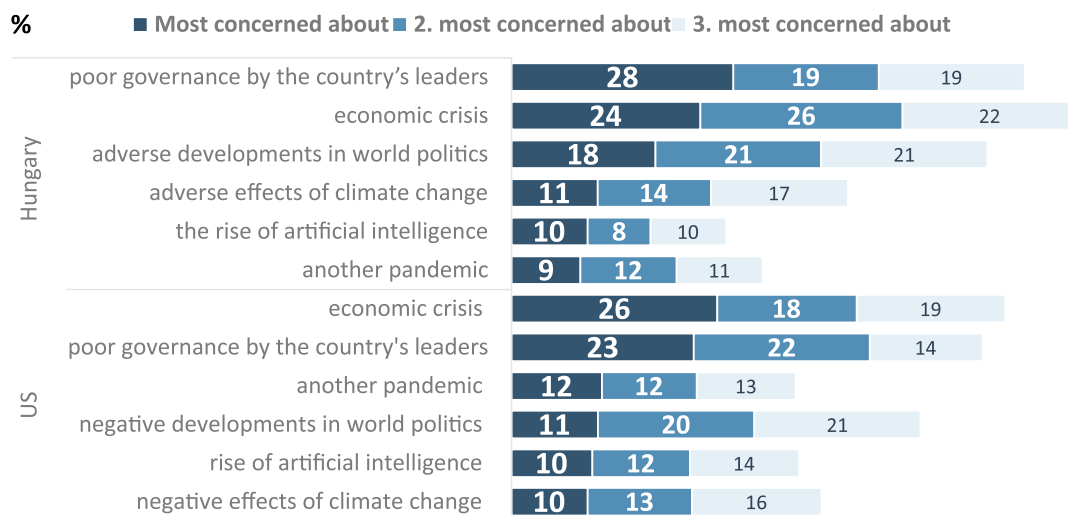
BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 /
 Question: Please rank three things that you are most afraid of in the future that
 affect your personal life, starting with the one you are most afraid of.

With respect to external circumstances, the order of priorities among American and Hungarian respondents is identical: they are most concerned about the economic crisis, and they find the threat of poor governance at both national and international levels similarly alarming. The proportion of respondents worried

about climate change is also very similar among 15—39—year—olds in both countries. Notably, the perceived likelihood of another global pandemic has declined in the rankings compared to previous years, while concern about artificial intelligence has increased, with both samples showing closely aligned figures.



Chart 11. FUTURE GENERAL CONCERNS



SOURCE: YOUTH RESEARCH INSTITUTE. 2025

BASE (BOTH): N=1000. YOUNG HUNGARIANS AND AMERICANS AGED 15-39 / Question: Of the following external conditions, which three are you most concerned about for the future?

People aged 15–39, whether living in Hungary or the United States, remain fundamentally optimistic about the future. Comparing last year's (2024) assessments with this year's (2025) expectations reveals that both their perceptions of human relationships and their plans for the future are characterized by a positive attitude. Their

concerns about the future are primarily driven by fear of personal loss, but they also express apprehension regarding the risks associated with a broader economic crisis and poor governance by national leaders. Consequently, options that offer predictability are likely to retain their appeal.

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A Concise Overview of Hungarian Family Policy

GEORGINA KISS-KOZMA

Traditional fears about demographic trends once centered on uncontrolled population growth, but today the concern has shifted in the opposite direction—rapid depopulation.

Europe has become an ‘old continent’, not only because of its history and long-standing traditions, but also because of its increasingly aging population. Fertility rates across most of the European Union have fallen well below replacement level and show no signs of recovery. This demographic shift has far-reaching consequences. With a shrinking and ageing population, it is no wonder that Europe struggles to keep pace in the global race for innovation. Innovation thrives on the energy of younger generations—individuals who are free to experiment, create, and take risks without the growing burden

of supporting multiple dependent generations.

Europe now faces the prospect of a demographic tipping point: accelerating population decline, aging societies, and persistently low birth rates converging into what some describe as a demographic singularity. This is not merely a demographic issue; it is a civilizational one. Combined with the widespread adoption of mass migration policies, many European nations confront difficult questions about their future—whether their historic civilizations will gradually diminish or be fundamentally transformed by incoming populations.

The Hungarian Strategy

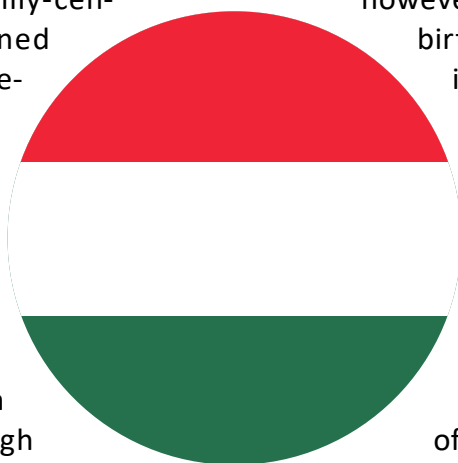
To reverse unfavorable demographic trends, the Hungarian government introduced what it called a “family-friendly turn” in 2010. Its objectives were twofold: first, to remove all obstacles that might prevent young people from starting families, and second, to restore the social prestige of family life and child-rearing while promoting and enabling the realization of family values.

Since 2010, Hungary has developed one of the most comprehensive and long-term strategies in Europe to address its demographic challenges. The government has undertaken an ambitious and multifaceted effort to craft an effective family policy aimed at

halting population decline and placing families with children at the center of the nation’s political vision. The guiding principle of this vision is that a strong Europe must be built on strong nations, and strong nations must be built on strong families. For this reason, family

policy has become a central pillar of government action.

With the election of a new conservative government in 2010, Hungary adopted a fundamentally different approach to tackling demographic and social issues. While earlier liberal governments often sought to address social inequalities through expanded subsidies and welfare programs, the new government focused on building a work-based economy grounded in the principle of “jobs, not welfare.” This vision is reflected in a broad set of family-centered policies designed to strengthen households and encourage child-rearing. These measures include increasing the income of families with children, helping young Hungarians in building a secure foundation for family life through stable employment, and supporting mothers as they reenter the workforce. Tax credits, subsidies, home loan programs, and expanded nursery services all contribute to ease the path toward starting a family and balancing work and parenting responsibilities. At the same time, the government seeks to elevate the prestige of stay-at-home motherhood, ensuring that women who view motherhood as their primary vocation receive meaningful support as well.



Between 2010 and 2021, several key demographic indicators in Hungary improved significantly. The fertility rate rose from 1.23 to 1.61, allowing the country to maintain or even slightly increase its birth rate despite a sharp decline in the number of women of childbearing age. Marriage rates nearly doubled, while the number of abortions fell by almost 50%. Hungary’s family policy is often cited as an example of successful right-wing governance, and its continuation is vital for future governments. It must be acknowledged, however, that the rise in the birth rate after 2010 was influenced heavily by the country’s economic performance. Wages increased substantially, and the expansion of family support programs strengthened the financial position of households. Between 2010 and 2014, foreign currency-denominated loans were converted into local currency, easing the debt burden on families. Housing costs also became more predictable, and in many cases lower, thanks to reduced utility expenses. A stronger consumer protection framework stabilized the credit market, and lending rates remained low. More broadly, birth rates tend to rise during periods of economic recovery, which further contributed to the demographic upswing.

Over the past 15 years, Hungary has developed a comprehensive system of family-policy measures aimed at making childbearing more accessible and removing barriers to starting a family. The overarching goal is to enable people to have as many children as they desire. In recent years, these family-oriented policies have produced tangible results,

leading to a more positive and sustainable demographic outlook.

The most effective policy tools in this regard rest on three pillars:

- adequate housing;
- financial stability, and
- a supportive work-life balance.

I. Providing Adequate Housing

Access to adequate housing is essential for family formation. It provides security, stability, and a foundation on which young couples can build their future. State subsidies—especially non-refundable ones—play a critical role in making housing attainable. In addition, targeted support for rural areas helps retain local populations and strengthens regional communities.

1. Family Housing Subsidy Plus (CSOK Plus)

Between 2015 and 2023, the Family Housing Subsidy (CSOK) provided non-refundable state subsidy to families raising or committing to raise at least one child when buying a new or pre-owned home or expanding their existing property. In 2024, it was replaced by the Family Housing Subsidy Plus (CSOK Plus). CSOK Plus is with a subsidized loan for married couples planning to have children, offered at a maximum interest rate of 3%. It is available if the wife is under 41—or until the end of 2025 for women over 41 who are at least 12 weeks pregnant. Loan amounts, based on existing and future children, range

from EUR 38,200 / USD 41,600 to EUR 127,400 / USD 138,500. Repayments may be suspended for one year after the first child is born, and a debt relief of EUR 25,500 per child applies for the second and subsequent children. CSOK Plus can be used to purchase a couple's first joint home, buy another home, or expand their current property.

2. Rural Family Housing Subsidy (Rural CSOK)

As part of the Hungarian Rural Program, Rural CSOK has been available since July 1, 2019, in settlements with populations of up to 5,000. It can be used for buying or building a new home; purchasing and simultaneously

expanding or modernizing a pre-owned home; or expanding or modernizing an existing property. The Rural CSOK scheme includes three components: a non-refundable state subsidy, a state-subsidized loan, and tax refund support. The amount of support depends on the number of children and the type of housing.

3. Rural Home Renovation Support

Starting January 1, 2025, the Rural Home Renovation Program will be relaunched in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 residents to support rural livelihoods and boost employment. As in 2021–2022: families raising children—and from spring 2025, retirees—can apply retrospectively for a non-refundable state grant of up to EUR 7,430 covering up to 50% of

renovation costs. From February 1, 2025, those lacking sufficient savings can also apply for a Rural Home Renovation Loan of up to EUR 14,850 through participating financial institutions.

4. Home Start Program

Launched on September 1, 2025, the Home Start Program provides a preferential loan of up to EUR 127,400 or USD 138,500, with a fixed 3% interest rate and a term of up to 25 years for first-time homebuyers. Unlike CSOK Plus, applicants are not required to have children or be married. Available nationwide, the program is expected to assist tens of thousands of young people in acquiring their first home, marking a significant step forward in improving access to housing.



II. Financial Stability

A core pillar of Hungarian family policy is the promotion of responsible family formation and parenthood, primarily through employment-based measures. To ensure that having children does not jeopardize a family financial security, the government provides a broad range of tax benefits for young people, couples, and families.

Family Taxation System

1. Family Tax Benefit

Since 2011, the family tax allowance system has undergone several significant reforms. The allowance can be shared between parents and may be claimed: for children by those receiving family allowance, for an unborn child from the 91st day of pregnancy, for individuals entitled to family allowance in their own right, or by those receiving disability annuity benefits. As of July 1, 2025, the monthly family tax allowance increases by 50%, rising to EUR 37/USD 44 for one child, EUR 150/USD 176 for two children, and EUR 371/USD 435 for three children. From January 1, 2026, these amounts will double, reaching EUR 50/USD 59 for one child, EUR 200/USD 234 for two children, and EUR 494/USD 579 for three children.

2. Personal Income Tax (PIT) Exemption for Young Adults Under 25

Since January 1, 2022, individuals under 25 have been exempt from paying personal income tax on income up to the level of the gross national average wage.

3. PIT Exemption for Mothers Under 30

Since January 1, 2023, women who have a child before the age of 30 are exempt from paying personal income tax on income up to the gross national average wage until their 30th birthday. Eligibility includes: women entitled to family tax benefits for a biological or adopted child, pregnancies reaching at least the 12th week, mothers who give birth or adopt before turning 30. This exemption applies to single mothers as well as married or partnered women. From January 1, 2026, the income cap will be removed, granting full PIT exemption on all earnings.

4. PIT Exemption for Mothers with Four or More Children:

Mothers raising four or more children are exempt from PIT on income included in the consolidated tax base. Eligibility requires either current entitlement to family tax allowance or at least 12 years of previous entitlement while raising four or more biological or adopted children.



5. PIT Exemption for Mothers with Three Children:

Beginning October 2025, all working mothers raising three children will also receive lifelong personal income tax exemption.

6. PIT Exemption for Mothers with Two Children:

Lifelong personal income tax exemption for mothers with two children will be introduced in four stages: from January 2026 for women under 40, from 2027 for those 40–50, from 2028 for 50–60, and from 2029 for all remaining eligible mothers.

7. Tax Allowance for First-Married Couples:

Introduced in 2015 to encourage young couples to marry, this allowance reduces the tax base by EUR 12,7/USD 13,9 per month for two years following the wedding, provided it is the first marriage of at least one spouse.

8. Family Tax Relief for Parents Raising Chronically Ill Children or Children with Severe Disabilities

From January 1, 2023, families raising chronically ill children and/or children with severe disabilities receive an additional EUR 25,5 / USD 27,7 per month in family tax relief.

Subsidies after Starting a Family (Childbirth, Marriage)

1. Baby Expecting Loan / Support

An interest-free, freely usable loan of up to EUR 27,200 is available to young married couples. Eligibility requires the wife to be 18–34 and at least one spouse to have three years of social security coverage. If a child is born within five years, repayment is suspended for three years. After a second child there is another three-year suspension and 30% debt forgiveness; after the third child results in full debt waiver.

2. Student Loan Suspension, Reduction, and Waiver

Women with student loans can suspend repayment from the 12th week of pregnancy for up to three years, with the state covering the interest. Mothers under 30 who give birth or adopt during studies or within two years of graduation are granted full debt forgiveness. Mothers over 30 or those having a second child more than two years after graduation, are granted partial forgiveness. For a third or subsequent child, the remaining student loan debt is fully waived.

Subsidies for the Younger Generation

1. Worker's Loan

Available from January 1, 2025, the Worker's Loan offers an interest-free loan up to EUR 9,900 for young workers aged 17–26 who are not studying in higher education. Applicants must commit to working or running a business

in Hungary for at least five years. For female borrowers: Upon the birth of the first or second child repayment may be suspended for two years; upon the birth of a second child 50% debt forgiveness is granted, upon the birth of a third child, full debt waiver is granted.

Parental Leave

Women with children under 3 years of age should have genuine freedom to choose whether to work or stay at home. Hungary's system of parental leave benefits aims to support both options.

1. Infant Care Benefit (CSED)

CSED is an insurance-based maternity benefit compensating for lost income after childbirth. Since July 1, 2021, the rate increased from 70% to 100% of the previous income, ensuring mothers

receive an equal to or higher than their previous net salary. Mothers under 30 may combine CSED with PIT exemption and the family tax benefit. From July 1, 2025, CSED is fully exempt from personal income tax. Eligibility: women with at least 365 days of insurance within the two years before childbirth, or giving birth during active insurance or within certain grace periods after termination. CSED is payable for 168 days starting up to 28 days before the expected due date.

2. Child Care Benefit (GYED)

GYED is an insurance-based benefit provided after CSED or maternity leave until the child turns 2 (or 3 for twins). Eligibility requires 365 days of insurance coverage in the previous two years or receipt of CSED with sufficient coverage.

Benefit level: 70% of the parent's daily earnings, capped at 70% of twice the minimum wage (EUR 1,008/month in 2025). A 10% pension contribution is deducted, while PIT is fully exempt from July 1, 2025. Recipients may work without restriction. GYED can also be granted to grandparents, foster parents, and students or recent graduates without insurance coverage.

3. Family Allowance

A universal, monthly benefit available to parents, foster parents, guardians, or individuals temporarily caring for a child in their own home. It is paid from birth until the completion of studies in a general or vocational school, but no later than age 20 (or age 23 for children with special educational needs).





4. Maternity support

A one-time, lump-sum universal benefit granted to all mothers upon the birth of a child.

5. Child Care Allowance (GYES)

A universal, monthly benefit available to parents, legal guardians, and grandparents caring for a child in their household aged one or older. If no insurance-based benefits (CSED, GYED) are received, GYES begins at birth; otherwise, it begins after CSED/GYED ends. Duration: The allowance is paid until the child turns 3, for twins: until the end of compulsory schooling, for chronically ill or severely disabled children until age 10. Parents may work without restrictions from the child's sixth month.

6. Child Raising Support (GYET)

A universal, monthly benefit for parents or guardians raising three or more minor children in their household. It is paid from the youngest child's third birthday until their eighth, as long as at least three minor children are raised at home. The benefit is EUR 71 per month, minus 10% pension contribution deducted. Recipients may work up to 30 hours per week, or without time limits if working from home.

7. Child Home Care Benefit (GYOD)

Since January 1, 2019, GYOD provides supports parents caring for a child with severe disability or chronic illness. In 2025, the benefit is EUR 720 per month, with a 10% pension contribution deducted; parents caring for two affected children receive 1.5x the amount. Recipients may work up to 4 hours per day (except in remote work).

Non-Monetary Benefits

1. School Meal Provision

An in-kind benefit providing free or discounted (50%) meals in institutions and during holidays. Free institutional catering is available for: children in nurseries, mini nurseries, or kindergartens receiving regular child protection benefits, permanently ill or disabled children, children from large families (three or more children), children from

low-income households, children in foster care. Municipalities must provide free holiday meals for eligible children during school breaks and nursery closures upon request.

2. Free Supply of Textbooks

Since 2020, all full-time students attending educational institutions receive textbook.

III. Promoting Work-Life Balance

Although Hungarian family policy primarily supports the traditional family model, it also acknowledges the prevailing consumerist and individualistic culture that often encourages single living. To counter these trends, the policy aims to restore the social value of motherhood through a range of initiatives, while remaining sensitive to the challenges faced by Hungarian women. In modern developed societies, many women struggle to reconcile professional ambitions with family plans, frequently postponing childbirth—a choice that increasingly results in having fewer children than desired.

Hungarian family policy does not impose social roles on women, rather it seeks to ensure that they can start and raise families of any size without financial disadvantages. It encourages childbearing while fully respecting women's freedom to choose how to balance work and family life. Those wishing to return to the labour market are supported through measures such as expanded nursery services, while those who prefer to stay home with their children receive substantial

financial support. Mothers may remain at home for up to three years after childbirth, receive their full gross salary during the first six months, and benefit from extensive tax exemptions: mothers under 30 enjoy full personal income tax exemption, while mothers with two or more children receive lifelong exemption.

Creating a family-friendly environment across the country is equally essential. Efforts in this direction include programs

such as the Women40 early retirement scheme and the Family-Friendly Workplace Award, which recognizes employers that promote a supportive and family-oriented work culture.

1. Development of Nursery Care

The government aims to build a parent-responsive nursery care network through comprehensive development initiatives. Since 2010, the number of nursery places has more than doubled, facilities and services have expanded 4.5-fold, and coverage now extends to over one-third of all settlements.

2. Infant Care Benefit Extra (CSED Extra)

Introduced on July 1, 2025, CSED Extra allows mothers to return to work as early as 90 days after childbirth while retaining 70% of the Infant Care Benefit (CSED). This measure supports mothers who wish to reenter the workforce sooner without losing financial security.

3. Child Care Benefit Extra (GYED Extra)

Launched in 2014, GYED Extra enables parents to receive childcare benefits for multiple children while engaging in paid employment. Restrictions on working while receiving GYED and GYES were gradually lifted—initially from the child’s first birthday, and since 2016, from the age of six months—significantly improving parents’ flexibility.

Despite these achievements, it is important to recognize that recent economic and social crises have negatively influenced Hungary’s fertility rates. When evaluating the effects and fluctuations of family policy, two considerations are essential. First, such policies rarely yield rapid or dramatic changes; they require patience and long-term commitment. Second, starting a family remains one of life’s most profound and personal decisions. The state can create supportive conditions and broaden opportunities, but ultimately, the choice lies with individuals.







The Beleaguered State of the American Family

ROGER SEVERINO – JAY W. RICHARDS
– EMMA WATERS – DELANO SQUIRES –
RACHEL SHEFFIELD – ROBERT RECTOR

Virtually the entire developed world is experiencing a demographic crisis, which is the result of an underlying crisis of a diminishing number of citizens who marry and have children. Before proposing policies to address the problem, policy analysts and politicians must understand the problem.

Compared to many countries in Europe, the United States may seem to be doing fairly well in this regard, but the downward trends are unmistakable. Marriage and family life in the U.S. has changed profoundly over the past six decades, and not for the better. The decline in stable marriage, more than any other factor, is almost surely a major cause of our demographic crisis. Sixty years ago, there was no public debate about the definition of marriage or whether it involved a man and a woman. Almost all American adults married, and few divorced. Very few couples lived together outside of marriage. Nearly all children were born and raised in homes with a married mother and father, and more Americans were parents.

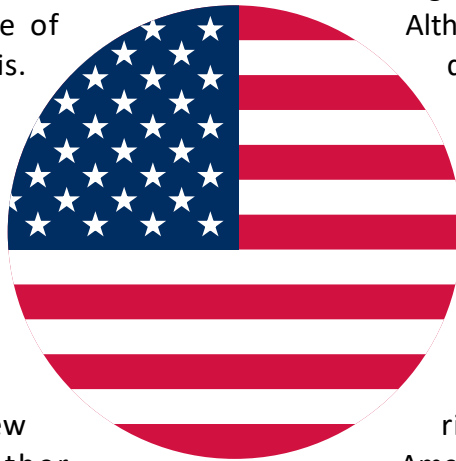
Unwed childbearing and sexual relations outside of marriage were much less accepted (Wilcox, 2023).¹ If a child was conceived outside of wedlock, the mother and father normally married

before the child's birth.² While marriage and family were less stable among some groups than others even then, these relationships were, on average, more stable for everyone than they are now.

Today, fewer people marry, and they marry at ever-older ages. Sex outside of marriage is extremely common.³

Although divorce rates have declined in the past few decades, many more Americans have divorced or have been affected by divorce than have older cohorts.

The erosion of marriage means that many Americans have less valuable social capital, which means weaker



1 GSS Data Explorer, "Is it wrong to have sex before marriage—original wording," 1972–2022, <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.ohio-state.edu/home> (accessed October 28, 2025).

2 U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home, Social Capital Project, July 23, 2020, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2020/7/the-demise-of-the-happy-two-parent-home> (accessed October 28, 2025). See also The Joint Economic Committee, Love, Marriage and the Baby Carriage, Social Capital Project, December 2017, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/bc6c3b18-b268-4178-b65f-56fec2b26002/4-17-love-marriage-and-the-baby-carriage.pdf (accessed October 28, 2025).

3 The Joint Economic Committee, Love, Marriage and the Baby Carriage, Social Capital Project, Figure 9, December 2017, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/bc6c3b18-b268-4178-b65f-56fec2b26002/4-17-love-marriage-and-the-baby-carriage.pdf (accessed October 28, 2025).



communities.⁴ Far fewer children are born into and raised in married-parent households, which research overwhelmingly shows is the best setting for a child to thrive (Wilcox et al., 2023; Wilcox&Lerman, 2014; Hoffman, 2023).⁵ Lower marriage rates and later marriage also mean that fewer children are born at all, and the drop in birth rates means that the networks to support families are smaller. Since this is true in almost every town and city, the entire country suffers as a result (Maestas et al., 2016).⁶

Marriage on the Ropes. Throughout American history, most adults married and remained married until one spouse died. Today, while most Americans still marry at some point, marriage rates have greatly declined. In 1962, 86 percent of American adults had ever been married, and most previously married people were widowed rather than divorced. Today, just 69 percent of Americans have ever been married, and most who are previously married are divorced rather than widowed.⁷

4 U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, *The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home*.

5 U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families—1959 to 2022,” Table 4, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-people.html> (accessed October 18, 2025).

6 U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, *The Consequences of Declining Fertility for Social Capital*, Social Capital Project, December 2022, <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2022/12/the-consequences-of-declining-fertility-for-social-capital> (accessed October 28, 2025).

Besides the decline in marriage, marriage takes place later in life. The median age at first marriage continues to rise and in 2024 was 30.2 years for men and 28.6 years for women.

7 Author calculations using IPUMS CPS Data. Note that because the CPS only measures for current marital status, some individuals who are currently widowed could have also been divorced if they had more than one marriage.

In the 1960s and 1970s, around 90 percent of adults aged 26 to 30 had married. Today, less than 40 percent of 26-year-olds to 30-year-olds have done so.

Normalization of Unwed Childbearing. As marriage declined, births outside of marriage became much more common. Unwed births were very rare for most of America’s history. That began to change in the 1960s when unwed childbearing started to climb. This trend persisted until the early 2000s when unwed births leveled off at around 40 percent.

The share of unwed births varies among different groups. For instance, unwed childbearing is the most common path to motherhood for minority women and women with low or moderate levels of education. Nearly 70 percent of non-Hispanic black children and 53 percent of Hispanic children are born outside of marriage.

Two-thirds of children born to women with low levels of education are born outside of marriage, and more than half (53 percent) of children born to women with moderate levels of education are born outside of marriage. By contrast, among women with high levels of education, just 12 percent of children are born outside of marriage.⁸

8 Low education is defined as women ages 15–44 in each year in roughly the lowest quintile of education, and women with high education are those in roughly the highest quintile of education. Moderate education includes the quintiles between those two. In 2022, women with low education were those without a high school education, women with moderate education were those with a high school diploma or some college education, and women with high education were those with a bachelor’s degree or higher.

In past generations, if a child experienced an unstable family, it was most likely due to divorce, which was rare in the 1950s and earlier. Even though divorce is far more common now than it was then—divorce shot up between the 1960s and 1980s—today, unwed childbearing is the most common reason a child is raised outside of an intact family (Wilcox et al., 2023). While it was welcome news that divorce rates trended downward and then leveled from their 1980s peaks,⁹ underneath this trend lurked a troubling fact: Fewer Americans than ever before get married in the first place. This is likely due in part to increased fear of the trauma of divorce among young adults (Whitton, et al., 2008; Waller&Peters, 2008).

Marital breakdown means that more children are born outside of marriage. It also means that more children spend at least part of their childhood raised without their married, biological parents. This is true for nearly half of American children (Fagan&Hadford, 2015; Bumpass&Sweet, 1989).

Not all children in two-parent homes, though, are living with their married biological parents. Some live with unmarried parents or stepparents, for example. As of 2019, only 59 percent of U.S. children lived in a home with their married biological parents. By contrast, in 1960, nearly 90 percent of children lived with two parents, and more than

9 U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, *The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home*.

70 percent lived with their married, biological parents.¹⁰

While declining marriage rates are linked to less stable family life, it also means that fewer children are born at all. This is because married women are still much more likely to bear children than women who have never married. The average number of children born to married (and unmarried) women has stayed roughly flat since the mid-1980s (although it has declined somewhat in recent years), but the share of women in their prime childbearing years who have never married has climbed.

As marriage rates have dropped and the age of first marriage and first birth has climbed, fewer children are born, and fewer Americans become parents. While lower marriage rates are not the only reason for the birth dearth, they are a central thread of the story (Stone, 2018). In short, more marriage and earlier marriage means more children.

Dropping Below Replacement. Fertility rates in the United States dropped below replacement level in the early 1970s and have remained below that threshold nearly every year since.¹¹ Analysts attribute declining fertility in the 1960s and 1970s to three main

factors: the surge of women entering the labor force, the introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s, and the nationwide legalization of abortion in the 1970s (Kanem et al., 2020).

In more recent years, the fertility rate has dipped to its lowest levels in history. While researchers expected births to decline in response to the 2008 recession, they also expected birth rates to recover as the economy improved. Instead, the decline continues, and births reached their lowest level in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fertility rate ticked up slightly in 2021, although it was still lower than before the pandemic and has continued to decline since then (Kearney&Levine, 2022).

What explains the decline in the fertility rate in the past decade or so? Some have argued that younger generations are more worried about finances and thus more hesitant to bring children into the world (Kaney et al., 2022). By contrast, Melissa Kearney, Phillip Levine, and Luke Pardue find little association between financial factors, such as housing prices, student loan debt, or childcare costs, and declining fertility since 2008 (Kaney et al., 2022).

Further, Scott Winship of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and Jeremy Horpedahl of the University of Central Arkansas argue that raising a family today costs slightly less than it did in 1985. They calculate that the number of work weeks required for the median male earner to support a family dropped

10 U.S. Census Bureau, American Families and Living Arrangements, Chart 16, U.S. Department of Commerce, May 1980, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1980/demographics/p23-104.pdf> (accessed October 28, 2025).

11 There is some reason to doubt these precise numbers. The subject deserves to be revisited, but we are assuming the conventional estimates here.

from 46.4 weeks in 1985 to 44.8 weeks today (Winship&Horpedahl, 2023). According to their estimate, it would be financially easier at middling incomes to raise a family today than it was 40 years ago even if that family had only one breadwinner.

Kearney and her co-authors suggest that recent declines in fertility may instead reflect changing priorities. Today's adults may favor autonomy and personal development over raising children more than earlier generations did (Winship&Horpedahl, 2023). Thus, greater opportunity cost rather than greater actual cost may be a better explanation.

But even if, on some measures, it takes a bit less work now than in 1985 to raise a family, the cost of living in some

places in the U.S. is still exorbitant. Housing, higher education, and health care costs—the market segments most subject to political tinkering—have gone up much faster than the rate of inflation for the past several decades (Jayakumar, 2022). Parents cannot simply buy the 1980 version of a house, health care, or college in 2025. Moreover, credit card debt is north of \$1 trillion (Antoni, 2024), and Americans have experienced high inflation across the board since 2021. These factors certainly contribute to the millions of Americans who think the American Dream is getting ever harder to attain.

Another chapter in the story of the shrinking family may be changing expectations about what it takes to raise a family (Stone, 2019). Kearney and



her co-authors suggest that younger adults may believe that parenting requires more resources today than it did in the past (Stone, 2019). On a similar note, in 2019 testimony before the Joint Economic Committee, AEI’s Lyman Stone explained that even if the real cost of childrearing has gone down over time, parents now spend more on their children than did parents in earlier decades. Stone believes this is because society expects more from parents than it did in earlier generations (Stone, 2019).

There is a cultural message that more children mean poorer quality parenting. It is now common to hear commentators and economists speak of parenting in terms of “quality over quantity,” for example. Incrementally, parents will have less time and money to spend on the children they have with each additional child, the philosophy suggests, so the way to raise successful children is to have fewer of them and invest more in each one.

To take a pop culture example of the rising material expectations for American families, the TV sitcom *The Brady Bunch*, which ran from 1969 to 1974, followed the lives of a family with six children—three boys and three girls. The Bradys were prosperous, upper-middle-class Californians who could afford family vacations to Hawaii. Yet the three boys shared a single small bedroom, as did the three girls. What is more, all of the kids shared a single bathroom!

The house portrayed in exterior shots of *The Brady Bunch* was under 2,500 square feet. By 2022, this was smaller than the average new single-family home and only slightly smaller than the median single-family home.¹² Clearly, the expectations of upper-middle-class Americans have changed in the half-century since *The Brady Bunch* started its popular afternoon rerun in 1975. (As have home prices: The Brady house went on the market in 2019 for \$1.8 million and sold for much more (Barrientos, 2019).

AEI scholar Timothy Carney similarly argues that declining birth rates are due to cultural changes, including unrealistic expectations for parents. As fewer people have children, he explains, communities become less centered on families, making it harder for parents or would-be parents to find the support they need. These cultural shifts away from the family further reinforce the norm for families to have fewer children or no children at all.

Carney also points to exceptions, though: In places where larger families are the norm, such as enclaves of Latter-day Saints, devout Catholics, or Orthodox Jews, cultural norms and civic infrastructure tend to support families. These include playgrounds, organized family activities, and

12 New Single-Family Home Size Continues to Grow, National Association of Home Builders, March 3, 2022, <https://www.nahb.org/blog/2022/03/new-single-family-home-size-continues-to-grow> (accessed October 28, 2025).

extended families nearby. All of this makes it easier to raise children and reinforces the norm of larger families (Carney, 2024). (These enclaves are explicitly religious. Policymakers should not ignore this fact.)

As the share of Americans with children diminishes, more aging Americans will lack adult children to support them in their older years. Smaller families

also mean fewer siblings, cousins, and other extended family members to help throughout life (Sheffield, 2022).

Are there public policies that can help to reverse these troubling trends? Yes, almost certainly. A successful approach will reform policies that discourage marriage and pursue policies that encourage or reward those who seek to form larger families.

It's All Related: How Family Structure Affects Family Flourishing

As put crisply by Melissa Kearney in her groundbreaking book, *The Two-Parent Privilege*:

I have studied US poverty, inequality, and family structure for almost a quarter of a century. I approach these issues as a hardheaded—albeit softhearted—MIT-trained economist. Based on the overwhelming evidence at hand, I can say with the utmost confidence that the decline in marriage and the corresponding rise in the share of children being raised in one-parent homes has contributed to the economic insecurity of American families, has widened the gap in opportunities and outcomes for children from different backgrounds, and today poses economic and social challenges that we cannot afford to ignore—but may not be able to reverse (Kearney, 2023).

Decades of social science research confirm what most people intuitively know: Children raised in homes with their married biological parents do better on a host of outcomes than children raised in other family arrangements, particularly single-parent homes.

Children Need Both Parents. One of the most basic benefits of stable married households is economic stability. In 2024, just 5 percent of children in married-parent families were living below the poverty line compared to 31 percent of children in families headed by a single mother and 14 percent of children in families headed by a single father (Shrider&Bijou, 2024). In 2024, the median income of a married-couple household was \$128,000, or more than twice as much as the median income of a female-headed household with

no spouse present, which was \$60,400. The median income for a male-headed household with no spouse present was \$83,260 (Kollar&Scherer, 2024).

Besides a greater risk of poverty, children raised outside an intact family are less likely to climb the economic ladder. They have poorer physical and mental health and are more likely to be abused.¹³ They are also more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors and are less likely to have stable marriages of their own (Amato&Keith, 1991; Amato&DeBoer, 2001).

In one study using a cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth from 1979, Marcia Carlson found that children in single-mother families had poorer behavioral outcomes than children in two-parent households. These outcomes held even when controlling for factors such as the mother's education (Carlson&Corcoran, 2001).

Children living with their married birth parents also earn better grades and are less likely to be suspended or expelled (Zill, 2020). In a 2009 study using data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, researchers Carolyn Hill, Harry Holzer, and Henry Chen found that children who grew up without both biological parents in the home were more likely to drop out of high school, to have a child outside of marriage, and to have been incarcerated. Adult children

who grew up in a non-intact family also reported lower levels of employment. These outcomes persisted even when the researchers controlled for household income. The harms of growing up without both biological parents were especially strong for non-Hispanic black men (Hill et al., 2009).

Choosing to Prioritize Parenting.

Research in the United States shows that parents view time spent caring for and teaching their children as a crucial investment in their future. For example, highly educated parents tend to spend significantly more time engaged with their kids than do less-educated parents—college-educated mothers spend about 4.5 more hours per week on childcare than mothers with only a high school degree spend (Guryan et al., 2008). This pattern holds even though more-educated parents also work longer hours outside the home, suggesting that they intentionally prioritize parenting duties despite higher opportunity costs.

Notably, the positive relationship between parent education (and income) and time spent with children is robust for both mothers and fathers and across various types of child-focused activities. These results have been validated in a series of subsequent structural labor economics research (Del Boca et al., 2013; Del Boca et al., 2014; Fiorini&Keane, 2014), which all point to the overwhelming importance of the quantity and quality of time that parents spend with their children.

13 U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, *The Demise of the Happy Two-Parent Home*.

Research in developmental psychology finds that warm, responsive, and cognitively stimulating parenting supports children’s cognitive growth and emotional security (Landry, 2001). Daily parent-child activities like talking, reading, and interactive play help to build children’s vocabulary, pre-literacy skills, and social-emotional understanding. In contrast, harsh or inattentive care can undermine trust and learning (Hart&Risley, 1995).

No Real Substitute for Two Engaged Parents. A large U.S. longitudinal study concluded that parent and family characteristics are far stronger predictors of children’s developmental outcomes than is any particular childcare setting or program.¹⁴ Factors such as parents’ education, family income, a stable two-parent home, and a rich home learning environment had much larger influences on children’s language, cognitive, and social development through kindergarten than whether the child attended daycare or was cared for at home. In short, their results suggest that engaged parenting by both mothers and fathers provides children with stimulation, guidance, and emotional support for which it is hard to fully substitute.

Infants Need Parental Care. When it comes to infant care, a growing literature has examined how outcomes differ between parental care and “outsourced” non-parental childcare. Multiple studies find that maternal employment in a child’s first year of life is associated with small but measurable decreases in subsequent cognitive test scores, whereas maternal work in the second or third year has more neutral (or even slightly positive) effects on development. Some have found that when mothers worked full-time during an infant’s first year, their children scored modestly lower on later cognitive tests (Waldfogel et al., 2002).

By contrast, maternal work in the second year had no major downsides for the child in question and in some cases correlated with gains in skills. This may be due to increased family income or high-quality care arrangements. Others have similarly reported that an additional 20 hours per week of maternal work in the first three years of a child’s life could shift cognitive achievement percentile ranks down slightly by age five or six (Ruhm, 2004).

These findings all suggest that stable, nurturing care by a parent in the very earliest months is especially beneficial for children’s development. Parents provide one-on-one responsive interaction—forming secure attachments and tailoring stimulation to the infant—which typical non-parental care settings may struggle to match for very young babies.

14 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, and Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Findings for Children up to Age 4 ½ Years, 2006, https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/Documents/SECCYD_06.pdf (accessed October 29, 2025).



If non-parental care is used in the first year, research emphasizes that ensuring high-quality childcare can at least help to mitigate potential risks. High-quality care—characterized by low child-to-caregiver ratios, a safe and language-rich environment, and sensitive, trained caregivers—has been linked to positive developmental outcomes that approach those seen with parental care.¹⁵

However, the cost of childcare has grown in part because of the excessive regulations affecting the provision of

childcare, which affects the demand (Umair et al., 2024). Family-friendly policies like parental leave can thus help to support early development by allowing parents to spend critical time with infants or to secure enriching care environments. Firms that offer such benefits will attract more productive workers (Liu et al., 2023).

Quality Matters. Nevertheless, the quality of childcare is critical: Expanding access to care without maintaining standards can be detrimental. One striking example comes from Quebec’s universal childcare program, which offered heavily subsidized (\$5 per day) daycare in the late 1990s (Baker, 2019).

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Findings for Children up to Age 4½ Years.

This program led to worse behavioral and health outcomes for children, on average, than for children who stayed in parental care, presumably because the surge in daycare availability was not matched by improvements in quality. The affected children exhibited higher levels of anxiety, aggression, and illness in the short run and even showed more teen delinquency in follow-up analyses. Non-parental care is not automatically benign—its effects depend on the nurturing quality of the environment provided.

Notably, extensive hours in non-parental childcare early on can have subtle socio-emotional downsides relative to parental care, especially if the alternative care is mediocre. Infants who spent long hours in daycare (particularly lower-quality or unstable arrangements) had slightly less secure attachments to their mothers—unless the mothers were highly sensitive caregivers to begin with.¹⁶

According to NIH studies,¹⁷ by age two, toddlers with a history of many hours in non-parental care exhibited more behavioral problems (such as aggression

and disobedience) than did children reared primarily at home. In contrast, children who experienced lower quantities of non-parental care (or whose daycare hours were limited) tended to have more harmonious mother-child interactions and fewer reported behavior problems in toddlerhood. These behavioral differences were small in magnitude in this study, but they reinforce the idea that a parent’s consistent, loving care in the first years is hard to replace.

What makes parenting in early childhood so important? Economists and developmental psychologists note that skills acquired in the first few years make later learning and healthy development easier. These are referred to as “dynamic complementarities” (Cunha&Heckman, 2007). For instance, basic cognitive abilities and socio-emotional skills formed in early childhood lead to better success in school, which in turn affects college attendance, job opportunities, and even health in adulthood.

Early investments in children have high returns: When children develop capacities like language, self-control, and curiosity at a young age, they are more able to absorb and benefit from education later on (Cunha et al., 2010). Early gains compound over time, whereas remediating skill gaps in adolescence is often less effective. This is consistent with findings from social experiments and developmental studies: High-quality preschool programs (such as the Perry Preschool Project in Michigan or the

16 U.S Department of Health and Human Services and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Early Child Care Research Network, The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development: Findings for Children up to Age 4½ Years.

17 NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, “Early Child Care and Self-Control, Compliance, and Problem Behavior at Twenty-Four and Thirty-Six Months,” *Child Development*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Aug 1998), p. 1145-1170, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1132367>; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, “Child Care and Mother-Child Interaction in the First 3 Years of Life,” *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 35, No. 6, p. 1399-1413, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.35.6.1399>.

Carolina Abecedarian Project in North Carolina) have demonstrated long-term improvements in educational attainment, earnings, and reduced crime, especially for at-risk children (Heckman&Masterov, 2007).

How Society Benefits from Intact Families. Healthy and vibrant families create substantial “positive externalities,” meaning spillover benefits for others, and everyone benefits. In an analysis of U.S. cities, neighborhoods with high concentrations of single-parent households suffer far more crime than neighborhoods with predominantly two-parent families suffer. In particular, researchers found that in Chicago, census “tracts with high levels of single-parent-headed households face 137% higher total crime rates, 226% higher violent crime rates, and 436% higher homicide rates, compared to tracts with low levels of single parenthood” (Mangual et al., 2023).

By contrast, areas where stable families are common have greater public safety and fewer social problems. These community-level effects hold even after accounting for poverty and other factors. Sociologist Robert Sampson famously observed that family structure is “one of the strongest predictors” of urban violence (Sampson, 1995). Strong families provide supervision, role models, and social control that ripple outward. When more children in a neighborhood are being well cared for and guided, peer influences improve and crime falls.

Likewise, economists have found that neighborhoods with more stable families foster upward mobility for all children in the area. Children from single-parent homes tend to have better economic outcomes when they grow up surrounded by many two-parent families, suggesting a positive peer effect or support network from the broader family-friendly community (Chetty et al., 2014). In fact, research on intergenerational mobility in the U.S. has identified the fraction of single-parent families in a community as the strongest predictor of a child’s chances of rising out of poverty. Even children of married parents do better when they live in communities with more two-parent families, suggesting that family stability yields benefits beyond its own household.

Strong families also bolster civic institutions and the social fabric of communities. Families are a primary source of socialization where children learn values such as cooperation, empathy, and responsibility. These traits later translate into active citizenship and community involvement. For example, parents who model volunteering or attending community meetings often inspire their children to become engaged in civic life. Communities with many stable, nurturing families tend to have higher levels of social capital—a term for the networks of trust and mutual support among residents (Putnam, 2000).

Declines in two-parent family formation in the late 20th century paralleled

declines in civic engagement and social trust in America. Conversely, when families are strong, they reinforce norms of reciprocity and collective responsibility. Neighbors in family-oriented communities are more likely to watch out for each other's children, support local schools, and participate in civic organizations. This creates a virtuous cycle: Well-supported children grow into adults who strengthen schools, churches, and community groups, which in turn provide resources and social support for the next generation of families.

Parents Matter Everywhere. A landmark survey called the Global Flourishing Study by Gallup, spanning more than 200,000 respondents across 22 countries starting in 2023, provides more evidence that the relational quality of childhood—especially parent-child relationships—is strongly associated with adult well-being across multiple domains (VanderWeele et al., 2025). Higher parent-child relationship quality predicts greater flourishing and better current mental health in adulthood with effects that are both statistically and substantively meaningful (Rothwell& Davoodi, 2024).

These associations extend to economic capability: Early-life conditions that include stable family structure, good childhood health, and strong relationships with parents correlate with higher financial well-being later in life (Bialowolski et al., 2025).

Pro-social behaviors follow a similar pattern: Parent-child relationship quality and related formative experiences are linked to a greater likelihood of charitable giving and helping strangers, as well as higher rates of volunteering, with some heterogeneity across countries (Nakamura et al., 2025). Policies that strengthen family relationships in the early years may yield broad social returns. They may not only improve individual flourishing and financial resilience, but also contribute to the civic goods of trust, generosity, and volunteerism in communities and nations at scale.

Marriage vs. Cohabitation. The benefits of the presence of both a mother and father in a child's life are clear, but how much does marriage matter? Cohabitation is so common that it makes it hard to analyze the connection between, for example, the home environment and academic outcomes in children. In 1968, 88 percent of households led by unmarried parents consisted of a single mother, while 12 percent had single fathers. Cohabitation was virtually nonexistent (Livingston, 2018).

That trend has changed in subsequent decades: 20 percent of unmarried parents living with a child in 1997 were cohabiting, and by 2017, it was 35 percent (Livingston, 2018). That does not mean that marriage has lost its relevance. One study of cohabitation trends found that 49 percent of college-educated cohabiting parents break up before their child turns 12 compared

to 18 percent of married couples with similar levels of education.¹⁸

The instability of cohabiting relationships in the United States has led to an increase in the number of parents who have biological children with more than one partner, either within or outside of marriage. This “multi-partner fertility” phenomenon has implications for parents and their children. One study found that the proportion of young parents who met the clinical definition of depression was greater for those with children by more than one partner than it was for those with children by one partner (Guzzo&Furestenberg, 2014). Fathers with children by multiple women are also less likely to live with all of their children (Guzzo&Furestenberg, 2014).

A 2013 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on father involvement found that only 8 percent of all fathers in the study who lived apart from their young children ate with them every day (Jones&Mosher, 2013:13). Forty-three percent said they did not eat with their children at all, and 27 percent said they did so once a week (Jones&Mosher, 2013:13). Non-resident fathers across ethnic lines also seem to become less involved as their children get older. Only 3 percent of non-resident fathers with children ages five to 18 ate with them every day (Jones&Mosher,

2013:17). More than 50 percent did not eat with their kids at all, and 32 percent did so just once a week (Jones&Mosher, 2013:17).

The likelihood of child abuse is also greater in homes with an adult male who is not related to the children (Wilcox, 2011). If rates of cohabitation continue to rise and those unions retain their characteristic instability, then the future of American family life will be marked by increasingly complicated webs of co-parenting relationships, absent fathers, different custodial and biological mothers and fathers, often competitive relationships with half-siblings, and increased family instability.

The divide between highly educated Americans, who have lower unwed birth rates, and poorer Americans, who have higher unwed birth rates, means that children from households with the fewest resources are the most likely to experience further social and economic deprivation in the absence of married parents. While other socioeconomic factors account for some of the differences in these children’s outcomes, marriage plays a major role.

The benefits of marriage for children extend beyond individual families. Children living in neighborhoods with a larger share of married parents, for example, are more likely to enjoy upward mobility even if they do not have married parents themselves (Chetty&Hendren, 2018).

18 AEI-Brookings Working Group on Childhood in the United States, “Children First: Why Family Structure and Stability Matter for Children,” Institute for Family Studies, February 28, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/children-first-why-family-structure-and-stability-matter-for-children> (accessed October 29, 2025).

Dads Matter to Children. While it is natural for policymakers to frame the appeal of intact, two-parent homes in terms of social and economic outcomes, children also benefit personally from living with both a father and mother under the same roof, and the commitment of marriage is the best guarantor of that. Each parent interacts with his or her children in unique ways that contribute to their development from birth. The complementary nature of men and women—both in physical and emotional terms—plays a large part in how children come to engage in and understand the world. No one questions the critical role that mothers play in child development, but cultural acceptance of single parenthood is one sign that fathers, while acknowledged as important, are not seen as necessary in a world where more women have the economic resources to raise children alone.

Children can feel the “dad difference,” though. Healthy father-daughter

relationships help girls to develop self-esteem (Bohn, 2021; Langlois, 2014). Dads also teach their sons valuable life lessons about strength and resilience through roughhousing. Further, good fathers give sons a role model to emulate and provide daughters with a template for the type of man they should desire.

Children need both parents, and it should not be controversial to state that the two people who create a baby are generally the two best-equipped individuals to raise that child. Though a father residing with his children does not necessarily mean that he is married to the mother, the percentage of children living with two unmarried parents is in the single digits across every ethnic group (Hemez&Washington, 2021). That means that the best way to ensure that more children grow up in loving homes with both parents and active, involved fathers is to promote marriage as the cornerstone of family life. The benefits of marriage are simply too large to ignore.



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Methodology

Between December 2024 and January 2025, the Youth Research Institute and Cygnal conducted surveys of 1,000 Hungarian and 1,000 American citizens aged 15–39, using representative samples, to explore their plans for the future and attitudes toward starting a family.

Among the American respondents, 52% were females and 48% were males; 67% were employed, 15% were students. 8% were aged 15–17, 51% were aged 18–29, and 41% were aged 30–39. 47% lived in the suburbs, 29% in cities, and 23% in rural areas. 63% were single and 28% were married.

In the Hungarian sample, 49% were females and 51% were males; 11% were aged 15–17, 44% were aged 18–29, and 44% were aged 30–39. 63% were employed and 22% were students. 20% lived in the capital, 51% in cities and 29% in rural areas (villages, towns or larger settlements). 49% of respondents were single, 29% were married, and 27% lived in a domestic partnership.



In this report, we analyze the future plans of young people aged 15–39 in Hungary and the United States, covering the years when most individuals make pivotal decisions about relationships, family, and career. This age group stands at the crossroads of tradition and change, and understanding their choices is essential for anyone seeking to build resilient communities in a rapidly changing world. Our aim is to compare how Hungarian and American young people perceive their circumstances, what aspirations they hold for the future, and their specific intentions regarding family formation. We also seek to understand the types of families they imagine and the concerns that shape their outlook on the future.



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