

# State of Contradiction:

Progressive Family Culture, Traditional Family Structure in California

*By* Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox

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## State of Contradiction:

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## I. Introduction

California has been at the vanguard of family change in America. Culturally and legally—from the Human Potential Movement to the passage of no-fault divorce under then-Gov. Ronald Reagan, from Hollywood movies and shows like “The Graduate” and “Friends”—the Golden State has played a central role in pioneering and representing the cultural attitudes that have transformed marriage and family life across the nation. Indeed, because of Hollywood’s, and now Silicon Valley’s, outsized influence on the global stage, California has amplified values and virtues like expressive individualism, personal fulfillment, and tolerance across the world.

These liberal values and virtues can be valuable in the public square, yet they often stand in tension with stable, married family life. In fact, scholars have found that the spread of these more individualistic values since the 1960s has been strongly linked to more cohabitation, less marriage, more divorce, and greater family instability.<sup>1</sup>

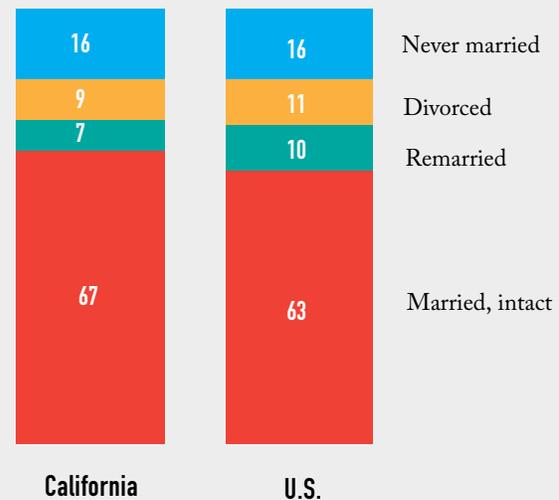
It is striking, then, that this Institute for Family Studies (IFS) report finds that California—despite being a global force for cultural liberalism—actually has a higher share of stable, married families than the nation as a whole. About 67% of California parents are in intact marriages, compared to 63% of American parents, according to an IFS analysis of the Census data. Likewise, 65% of children ages 0-17 in California reside with their married, biological parents, compared to 62% of children in the United States. In other words, family life in the Golden State is more stable than in the country as a whole.

This IFS report tries to unravel the contradiction between California’s progressive family culture on the one hand and the conventional family choices of its residents on the other by delving more deeply into the demographics of the Golden State. What do education, immigration, ethnicity, and culture in California tell us about why, taken as a whole, the state appears to talk left but live right?

<sup>1</sup> Ron Lesthaeghe, “The Second Demographic Transition: A Concise Overview of Its Development,” PNAS December 23, 2014: 18112-18115; Lesthaeghe and Lisa Neidert, “The Second Demographic Transition in the United States: Exception of Textbook Example?” *Population and Development* 32, no. 4 (2006): 669-698.

## Marital status of parents in California vs. U.S.

% among adults ages 18 to 50 with children under 18



Notes: “Divorced” includes those who are separated or widowed.  
Source: American Community Survey 2017, IPUMS.

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One factor that looms large in the state’s family story is California’s exceptionally diverse immigrant population. Immigrant families are more likely than native-born families to be intact; this is true for Asians above all. Compared with U.S. parents overall, California parents with children under age 18 are more likely to be Hispanic or Asian, and less likely to be white. The largest ethnic group in California is Hispanic, making up 46% of all parents ages 18 to 50. About 15% of parents in California are Asian, twice as many as the share among U.S. parents (7%).<sup>2</sup> Only about 3 in 10 California parents are white, compared with 57% in the nation.

Meanwhile, California is home to the largest immigrant population in the United States. More than 40% of Californians with children under age 18 are foreign born (43%), almost double the share in the country (23%).

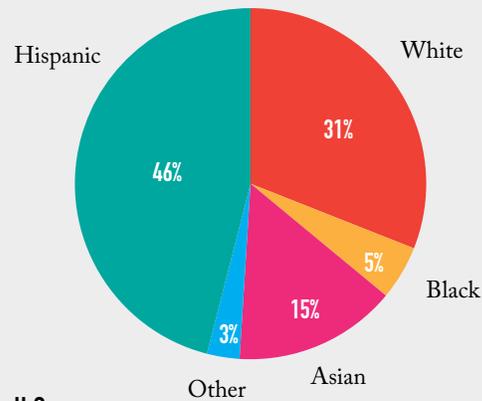
Given that immigrant families, as well as Asian families, are more likely than other families to be intact, the larger presence of these demographic groups may help account for the higher stability among California families.

Also helping to explain the apparent contradiction between California’s progressive values and its relatively traditional families is the difference between the public beliefs and personal aspirations of its college-educated population. Nationwide, the share of college-educated couples in intact families is considerably higher than for those without a college degree. That’s also the case in California. Marriage levels for college-educated parents are about 20 percentage points higher than for their less-educated peers. Yet, rhetorically, college-educated elites embrace progressive family values whole-heartedly, while they take a more marriage-minded approach in private, according to our new California Family Survey of men and women ages 18 to 50 fielded by YouGov. When we ask Californians about family diversity (in terms of kids growing up in different kinds of families today),

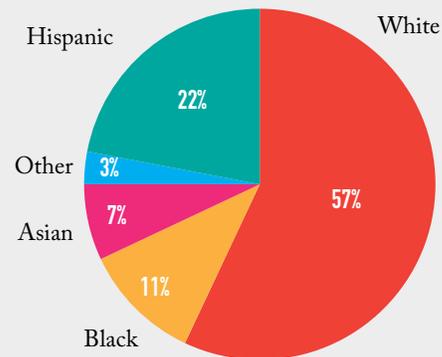
## Racial/ethnic makeup of parents in California vs. U.S.

% among adults ages 18 to 50 with children under age 18

### California



### U.S.



Notes: The "other" slice includes adults of other races or mixed races.  
Source: American Community Survey 2017, IPUMS.

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<sup>2</sup> Among all adults ages 18 to 50, the racial/ethnicity makeup is: 42% Hispanic, 33% white, 15% Asian, and 6% black for California; and 20% Hispanic, 56% white, 7% Asian, and 13% black for the U.S., according to the American Community Survey 2017, IPUMS.

college-educated Californians (including parents) are the most likely to agree that it should be celebrated. However, in private, this same group of Californians is also the most likely to say that it is very important for them personally to be married before having children. And the share of parents in intact marriages (80%) is also markedly higher for college-educated elites than for Californians without a college degree (61%).

## ABOUT THE DATA

Findings in this report are based mainly on two sources: data from a recent Institute for Family Studies (IFS) survey in California and Census data from both the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS).

**California Family Survey data:** The Institute for Family Studies California Family Survey was conducted by YouGov between Sep. 6 and Oct. 11, 2019, with a representative sample of 2,200 adults ages 18 to 50 living in the state of California, including 912 respondents who have children under age 18, and an oversample of 200 respondents who reside in the Bay Area and earn more than \$200,000 per year in household income. A total of 2,262 interviews were completed and then matched down to a sample of 2,200 to produce the final dataset.

The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year sample

with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The characteristics of the final weighted sample mirror those of the general population ages 18-50 in California. The overall margin of error for the survey is  $\pm 2.9\%$ .

**Census data:** Unless otherwise noted, all demographic analyses in this report are based on the American Community Survey 2017 and the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) 2018. The data sets were obtained from the IPUMS database (University of Minnesota, <http://www.ipums.org>).

All demographic analyses (except for children's living arrangements) are based on adults ages 18 to 50. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adults are included but are not analyzed separately. All estimates have been weighted to reflect the actual population.

## II. Talking Left, Living Right: The family culture and practice of California elites

*“[The] liberal upper middle class actually tends to live quite socially conservative lives. And so if their views were really so undermining of family formation and social bonds, I would think you would see it show up more in the communities of the people who are most likely to espouse those views.”*

~ Michelle Goldberg, “The Argument,” *The New York Times*<sup>3</sup>

Michelle Goldberg, a *New York Times* columnist and resident of an upper-middle class Brooklyn neighborhood, was reflecting here on an empirical reality that has attracted the attention of a number of ideologically diverse scholars. Perhaps most notably, both the conservative political scientist Charles Murray, and his more liberal counterpart, Robert Putnam, have highlighted progressives’ ideological embrace of diverse family forms on the one hand, and their own traditionalism—or familism—on the other.<sup>4</sup> By familism, we refer to the values and virtues that sustain strong and stable marriages, an intense parenting ethic, and the capacity to put the welfare of the family above that of the individual.<sup>5</sup> In simple terms, when it comes to family life, elites often talk left and live right.

We found exactly this apparent contradiction in the new YouGov survey of Californians ages 18 to 50, where college-educated California elites stand out for their more progressive views on family issues. A vast majority of Californians (85%) with a college or graduate degree agree that family diversity, “where kids grow up in different kinds of families today,” is something to be publicly celebrated, compared with 69% of Californians without a college education.

When it comes to views on single women having children on their own, the survey finds that college-educated Californians are among the least likely to agree that it is morally wrong: only a quarter agree, compared with 31% of those with a high school or less education.

### Educated Californians are more likely to endorse family diversity

% agree

#### Family diversity should be celebrated



#### Morally wrong for single women to have children on their own



Notes: Based on adults ages 18-50.  
Source: IFS California Family Survey.

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<sup>3</sup> Transcript of “How to Win Impeachment,” The Argument podcast, *The New York Times*, 10/24/19.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (Crown Publishing, 2012); Robert Putnam, *Our Kids* (Simon and Schuster, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Familism has been defined a variety of ways over time. See, for instance, Edward Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Free Press, 1967); Angel G. Lugo Steidel, Josefina M. Contreras, “A New Familism Scale for Use With Latino Populations,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 25, no. 3 (2003); Ernest Watson Burgess, Harvey J. Locke, and Mary Margaret Thomas, *The Family: From Institution to Companionship* (American Book Company, 1963).

The progressive family views elites hold in the abstract contrast with the values and virtues they embrace for their own personal lives. College-educated Californians take a much more marriage-minded approach when it comes to their own children. Close to 70% of Californians with a college degree agree that “It’s very important for me, personally, to be married before having my children,” compared with about 60% of their counterparts who do not have a college degree. And in this case, better-educated Californians’ family life is more likely to conform to their personal views: A vast majority of college-educated parents have been married (94%)—only 6% are never-married parents. Contrast that 6% to the 23% of high school-educated Californian parents who have never been married. The marriage gap shows up in current living arrangements as well: 80% of Golden State parents with a college or graduate degree are in intact marriages, compared with 60% of those without a college degree.

Moreover, and contra Goldberg’s claim that cultural liberalism has no negative link to the stability of upper middle-class families, the minority of more educated Californians who do hold a less familistic mindset are less likely to have stable families.

College-educated parents who agree that it is very important for them personally to be married before having children are more likely to be in intact marriages than those who disagree: 86% vs. 69%. And the gap among parents without a college degree is even bigger: 58% of those who agree with the statement are in intact marriages, compared with 36% of the parents who do not (*see figure in Appendix*). In fact, it may be that familism is more important in stabilizing family life among less-educated Californians.

Likewise, those Californian parents who personally want to marry before having a baby are more likely to be in stable families even after controlling for education, income, race/ethnicity, age, and a number of other background factors.<sup>6</sup> Net of all these factors, Californian parents who agree with the marriage-before-baby-carriage for themselves are about twice as likely to be in intact marriages compared to those who disagree.

<sup>6</sup> The regression model also includes gender, religious service attendance, and whether the respondent is foreign born.

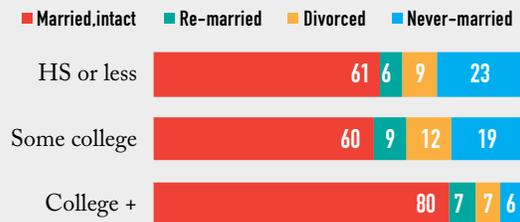
## Educated Californians are more likely to embrace “marriage before baby” personally

% agree

Very important for me, personally, to be married before having children



### Marital status of parents by education



Notes: Based on adults ages 18-50.

Source: IFS California Family Survey. American Community Survey 2017, IPUMS.

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We can't know for sure if this relationship between personal aspiration and marital status is causal, but it is suggestive that, on average, personal preference may play a significant role in whether someone finds themselves in a stable, married family.

Not all attitudes in the California Family Survey vary by education. It's worth noting that despite Californians' general openness to all family forms, a plurality of the state's residents (about 44%), whether college-educated or not, do agree that "couples with children should make every effort to stay married," even if they are unhappy. That applies especially to Californians with kids, who are more likely (53%) than those without kids (38%) to agree that couples with children should make every effort to stay married.

### **III. Immigrants and Asians: The bulwarks of Golden State familism**

Still, even though Californians with greater education are more likely to embrace a familistic ethos in private, their familism does not appear to explain the distinctively high levels of family stability found in California. That's because among parents with children, California does not have a higher share of college-educated residents than the nation as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

What it does have is distinctively high levels of immigration, which appear to contribute more than other factors to the relatively higher share of stable families in the state. To see how factors like race/ethnicity, immigration, income, and education independently affect the family makeup in California and the U.S., we conducted a decomposition analysis and standardized California's rates of stable families using the population characteristics of the U.S. as a whole. In other words, what would families in California look like if California had the same racial, ethnic, or immigrant makeup as the U.S. as a whole?

Our analysis finds that the share of intact families among parents ages 18 to 50 in California would drop 2.6 percentage points if California had the same share of foreign-born parents as the U.S. Similarly, if California had the same ethnic/racial makeup of parents as the U.S., California's proportion of intact families would drop about 1 percentage point. Families in California would also be less stable if Californian parents had the same income distribution as parents in the U.S. (California families are overall more affluent than American families, in part, because middle-income and lower-income families are more likely to migrate out of the Golden State than remain in California.<sup>8</sup>)

The education level of California parents does not appear to explain California's higher level of stable families. In fact, if Californian parents had the same educational attainment as parents in the nation, we would see a small boost in the share of intact families among Californians ages 18 to 50 with children.

<sup>7</sup> Among parents ages 18 to 50 with children under age 18, the share of college-educated parents in CA is 33%, compared to the national average of 35%, according to an IFS analysis of 2017 ACS.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Lin, et al., "California Migration: The Story of 40 Million," *Cal Matters*, July 29, 2019; Brian Uhler and Justin Garosi, "California Losing Residents Via Domestic Migration," California Legislative Analyst's Office, February 21, 2018.

As the nation’s largest destination for immigrants, California is home to about 11 million immigrants. Even though half of immigrants in California are from Latin America, Asian immigrants have been on the rise in the recent decade and make up the majority of new immigrants in California.<sup>9</sup>

Compared with native-born Californians, immigrants are more likely to embrace familistic values and virtues—and are also more likely to be in intact families. For instance, 69% of immigrant parents want marriage before childbearing for themselves, compared to just 62% of native-born parents.

When it comes to ethnicity, Asian Americans stand out in comparison with other racial and ethnic groups in California. Asian Californians are most likely to embrace the value of marrying before having children. When asked in the California Family Survey, three quarters of Asian Californians agree that it is very important for them to be married before having children, compared with 62% of whites, 66% of blacks, and 59% of Hispanics.

When it comes to divorce, Asian Californians are also more likely to take the familistic view. Over half of Asians (52%) agree that “Even if they are unhappy, couples with children should make every effort to stay married,” compared with 44% of whites and 42% of Hispanics.

At the same time, Asian Californians are almost as likely to endorse family diversity as other groups. Some 79% of Asians agree that family diversity is something to celebrate, while 82% of whites and 73% of blacks agree. Interestingly, despite their higher levels of support for childbearing outside of marriage, Hispanics are the least likely (67%) to agree that non-traditional families should be celebrated.

California’s immigrant culture and diverse racial and ethnic population are largely interrelated. Hispanic and Asian populations make up much bigger shares among foreign-born parents than they do among native-born parents in California (87% vs.42%).<sup>10</sup> Among Hispanic parents with children under age 18, 54% are foreign born, and the share is even higher among Asian parents in California (81%).

<sup>9</sup> Hans Johnson and Sergio Sanchez, “Immigrants in California,” *Just the Facts* (Public Policy Institute of California, May 2019); Jens Manuel Krogstad and Michael Keegan, “15 States With the Highest Share of Immigrants in Their Population,” Pew Research Center Fact Tank, May 14, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Based on 2017 American Community survey, among foreign-born adults ages 18 to 50 with children under age 18 at home, 58% are Hispanic, 10% are White, 1% are black, and 29% are Asian. And the shares among native-born adults of the same age are 37% Hispanic, 46% white, 7% black, and 5% Asian.

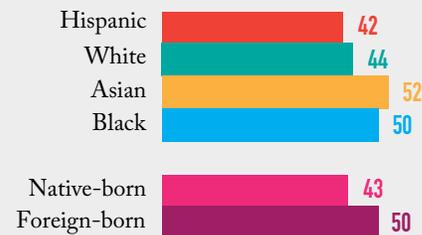
## Asian, foreign-born Californians are more likely to value “marriage before baby” and steer clear of divorce

% agree

### Very important for me to be married before having children



### Couples with children should make every effort to stay married



Notes: Based on adults ages 18-50.  
Source: IFS California Family Survey.

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The views held by Asians and immigrants in California are largely in line with how they live their family lives. Over 80% of Asians with children are in an intact marriage, the highest share among the major ethnic/racial groups. Never-married parents among Asians are rare, as only 5% of Asians with young children fit into that category.

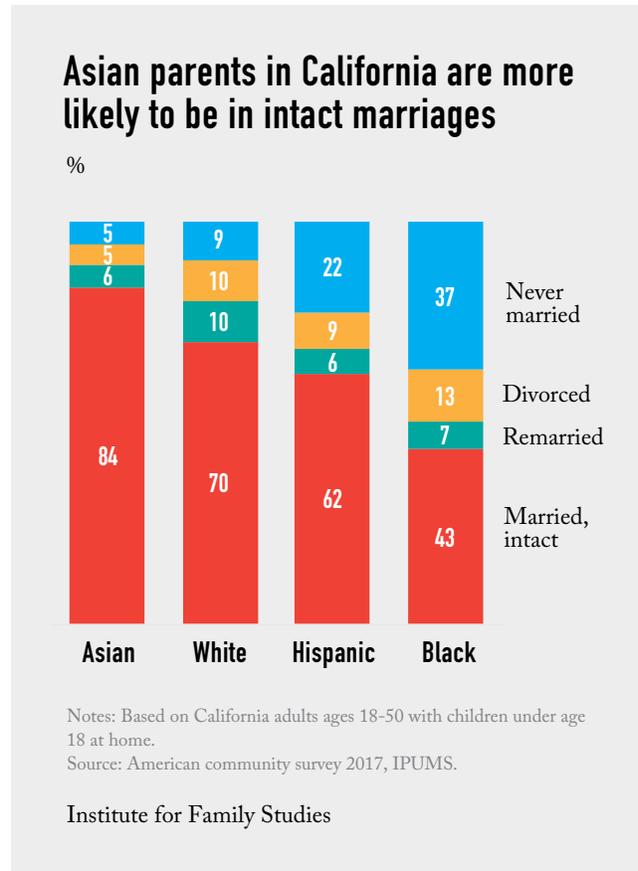
Among parents in California, Hispanic parents are less likely than Asian parents (as well as white parents) to be in intact marriages, and they are more likely to have never been married. About 1 in 5 Hispanic parents in California (22%) have never been married, a share that is substantially higher than it is among white parents (9%), though it is quite a bit lower than among black parents in California (37%).

The share of parents with children in intact marriages is much higher among foreign-born parents (75%) than among native-born Californians (62%). This is partly due to the higher share of Asians and Hispanics among foreign-born parents, but being a first-generation immigrant is itself linked to greater family stability.

For example, among Asian parents in California, those who were first-generation immigrants are more likely to be in intact families than those who were born in the U.S. (86% vs. 76%). And the same pattern applies to Hispanic parents. Among Hispanic parents who are foreign-born, 68% are in intact families, but the share goes down to 55% among native-born Hispanics with children.

The family stability advantage enjoyed by Asians and immigrants is partly related to their high levels of education, but also to culture. Asian Americans, especially among those with children, are highly educated. A majority of Asian parents in California (63%) have a college or graduate degree. The share is slightly lower among white parents (50%), but much lower among Hispanic (12%) and black parents (27%). On the other hand, immigrants tend to be more familistic than native-born Americans, as noted earlier. And foreign-born California parents are more likely than native-born parents to attend religious services regularly (47% vs. 41%).

Why do immigrants and Asians have more stable family lives than those born in the U.S. and other ethnic or racial groups?



We ran a multivariate regression to try to answer that question, and more specifically, to determine whether these differences are still significant after controlling for sociodemographic factors like educational attainment, income, age, gender, as well as attitudes about marrying before having children. The results show that they are significant, although some of these differences can be explained by the SES factors and the personal attitudes toward marrying before having children (*see Table 1 in the Appendix for details*). Specifically, Asian parents are about twice as likely as whites to be in intact families, and the odds of immigrants being in such families are 50% higher than among non-immigrant families, even after controlling for a range of demographic and cultural factors.

Although we cannot make causal claims here, there is no doubt that Asian and immigrant families are more stable than other families in California, perhaps partly because they are more likely to hold the kinds of values and virtues that are associated with strong and stable families. Furthermore, unobserved factors associated with being Asian or an immigrant also would appear to play a role in this Golden State family story.<sup>11</sup> Despite being a public beacon for progressive family values, then, California has distinctively high levels of family stability largely because it has so many immigrants, and partly because it has a disproportionate share of Asians—two groups who embrace more family-centered values and virtues in their own lives than is true for the nation as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (Russell Sage, 2015).

# Happily Ever After in Hollywood:

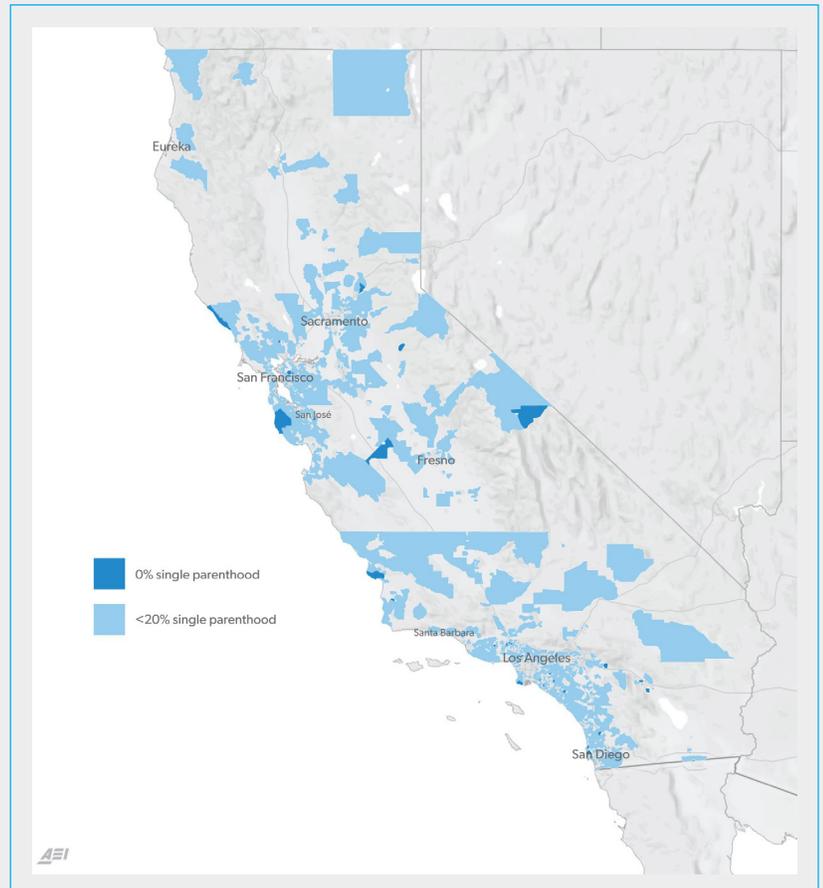
## Where Are the Top California Neighborhoods for Family Stability?

By: Peyton Roth and W. Bradford Wilcox

Progressives, including those who control the commanding heights of the culture, are more likely to celebrate family diversity and downplay the idea that the two-parent family plays a central role in childhood development, economic opportunity, and communal vitality.<sup>1</sup> California—widely touted as a vanguard for progressive cultural values—is a prime example of this. This report finds that college-educated Californians are especially likely to endorse the ideas that family diversity should be celebrated and that there is nothing wrong with single women having children on their own. In other words, California elites “talk left” when it comes to the family ethic they embrace in public.

But when it comes to their own families, California elites with kids overwhelmingly “live right” in private, giving their children the benefit of growing up in a two-parent family. In fact, this pattern of talking left and living right plays out at the neighborhood level in the Golden State as well. It turns out that some of the most elite neighborhoods in the state—including several in Hollywood and San Francisco—have virtually no single parents.

Using a new dataset from Harvard University’s Opportunity Atlas, we scanned neighborhoods with at least 250 children in the Atlas’ sample to locate California neighborhoods with low rates of single parenthood.<sup>2</sup> We found that 40 Californian



**Figure A1.**

*Map of neighborhoods across California with low single- parenthood rates (top 40 neighborhoods are highlighted in dark blue and all neighborhoods with fewer than 20% single parenthood are highlighted in light blue).*

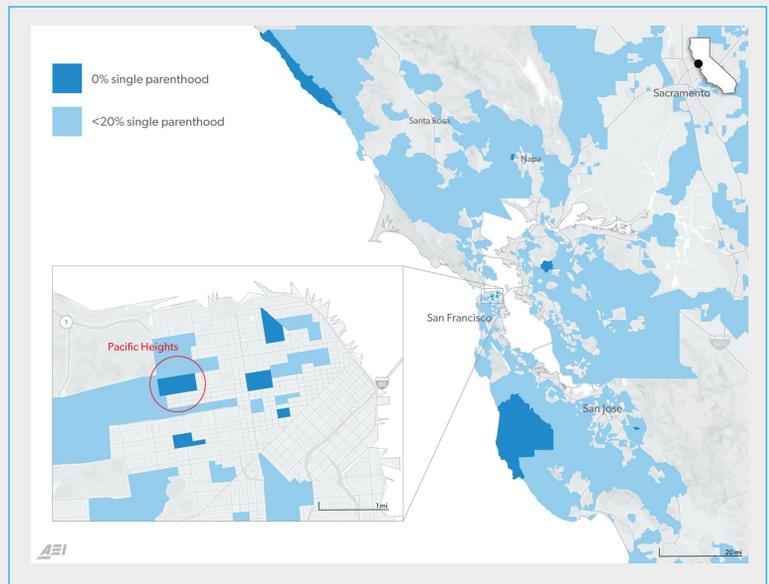
<sup>1</sup> Christina Cross, “The Myth of the Two-Parent Home,” *The New York Times*, December 9, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya Porter. Working Paper. “The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility,” Online web tool: <https://opportunityatlas.org>.

neighborhoods (with geographic boundaries defined by U.S. census tracts) reported a staggeringly low 0% single parenthood rate between 2012 and 2016, based on data from the American Community Survey (ACS). Because ACS data is drawn from a sample of families in these neighborhoods, not the entire population of families with children in these communities, they undoubtedly missed some single-parent families. But it is clear that these 40 neighborhoods—which are depicted in dark blue in the maps below—have very low rates of single parenthood, meaning that almost all of the children in these neighborhoods are being raised in two-parent families.

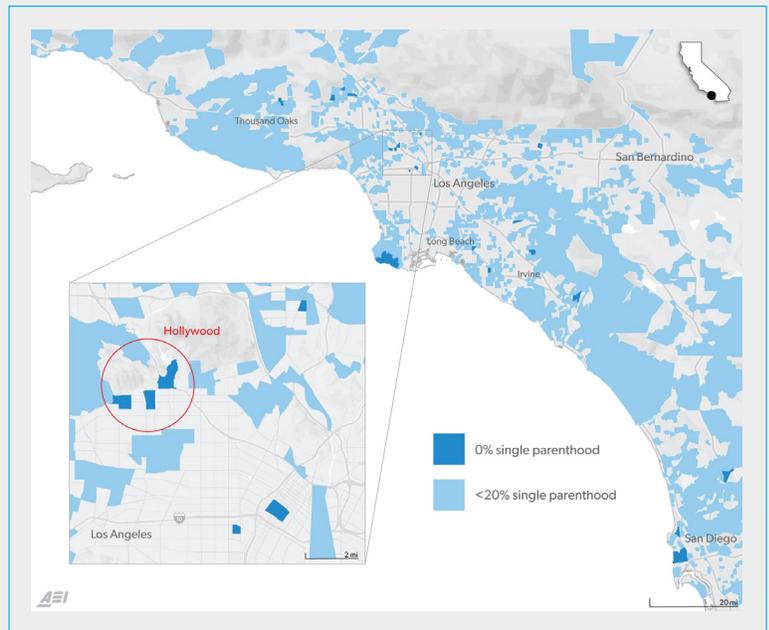
In looking at the geographic location of the neighborhoods, we discovered that many of them stand at the center of economic and cultural power in California. Take, for example, census tract 134.00, located in San Francisco’s swanky Pacific Heights neighborhood. Strolling through the streets of this neighborhood, you will find multi-million-dollar historic row houses, and a pleasantly-tiered Alta Plaza park with picturesque views of the San Francisco Skyline. Residents of this neighborhood had a median income of about \$135,000 between 2012 and 2016, and Hilary Clinton received more than 80% of the vote here in the 2016 election. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Larry Ellison, cofounder of Oracle, own homes just two blocks from this census tract.

In Southern California, three neighborhoods with single parenthood rates of essentially 0% can be found in the heart of Hollywood. Take a trip through Whitley Heights Historic District, below the Hollywood Sign, and nestled among the lavish former residences of Francis X. Bushman and Judy Garland, you will find residents who voted for Clinton by a rate of about 86% in 2016. You will also find virtually no single parents in this Hollywood Hills neighborhood.



**Figure A2.**

*Map of neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area with low single-parenthood rates (top 40 neighborhoods are highlighted in dark blue and all neighborhoods with fewer than 20% single parenthood are highlighted in light blue).*



**Figure A3.**

*Map of neighborhoods in Southern California with low single-parenthood rates (top 40 neighborhoods are highlighted in dark blue and all neighborhoods with fewer than 20% single parenthood are highlighted in light blue).*

And when we looked at neighborhoods across California that score in about the upper third for family structure—that is, communities where less than 20% of the parents are single parents—we found that these neighborhoods are disproportionately college-educated, affluent, white, and Asian. [Table A1](#) is indicative of the ways in which neighborhoods with comparatively few single parents tend to be more privileged. About 46% of adults aged 25 and over in these neighborhoods have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 31% of adults across all California neighborhoods. The poverty rate in these neighborhoods is about half the California average, and the median households bring in about an extra \$30,000 per year of income.

**Table A1. Demographics of neighborhoods with 20% or fewer single parents vs. all of California**

Variables	< 20% single parent neighborhoods	All CA Neighborhoods
<a href="#">% Single Parents (2012–2016)</a>	13%	31%
<a href="#">Poverty Rate (2012–2016)</a>	7.9%	16%
<a href="#">Median Income (2012–2016)</a>	\$98,621	\$68,440
<a href="#">Median Rent (2012–2016)</a>	\$1,867	\$1,400
<a href="#">% with at least a bachelor’s degree (2012–2016)</a>	46%	31%
<a href="#">% Foreign Born (2012–2016)</a>	25%	27%
<a href="#">% White (2010)</a>	65%	62%
<a href="#">% Hispanic (2010)</a>	21%	38%
<a href="#">% Asian (2010)</a>	18%	15%
<a href="#">% Black (2010)</a>	3.1%	7.2%

Source: Data on educational attainment was retrieved from the 2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates data available on the U.S. Census Bureau website.<sup>3</sup> Data on race and ethnicity was retrieved from the 2010 Decennial Census data available on the U.S. Census Bureau website.<sup>4</sup> All other variables were retrieved from datasets made available by Raj Chetty and colleagues at <https://opportunityatlas.org>.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Table S1501. Educational Attainment by California Census Tract.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Decennial Census. Table QT-P3. Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin by California Census Tract.

<sup>5</sup> Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya Porter. Working Paper. “The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility,” Online web tool: <https://opportunityatlas.org>.

It's also clear from the maps above that much of Silicon Valley, many of the best neighborhoods in Los Angeles County, and many nice beach-side communities across the state have comparatively few single parents. Two-parent families dominate the state's elite neighborhoods.

These geographic patterns are largely consistent with the findings in this report. More elite neighborhoods in California tend to have markedly fewer single parents than is true for the average neighborhood in the state. This matters because children who are raised in neighborhoods with fewer single parents tend to enjoy better schools, less crime and disorder, and more opportunities growing up, which in turn lead to better outcomes for them as adults—from greater incomes to higher marriage rates to lower odds of incarceration.<sup>6</sup> The bottom line is that many elite families in California are triply advantaged: they are more likely to be headed by two parents, they have more educational and economic resources, and they often live in neighborhoods characterized by more two-parent families that afford better opportunities for their children. But despite privately surrounding themselves with neighbors who enjoy more stable families, this report suggests that comparatively few of the elites who make their homes in places like the Hollywood Hills or Pacific Heights lend public voice to the importance of stable, two-parent families for other people's children across the Golden State—or the nation at large.

<sup>6</sup> Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren, "The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Child Exposure Effects," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 33, no. 3 (August 2018): 1107-1162; Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, et al., "Race and economic opportunity in the United States: An intergenerational perspective," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2018. Raj Chetty, JN Friedman, et al., "The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the childhood roots of social mobility," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2018; W. Bradford Wilcox, Jacob Van Leeuwen, and Joseph Price, "The Family Geography of the American Dream: New Neighborhood Data on the Single-Parenthood, Prisons, and Poverty," *Institute for Family Studies Blog*, 2018.

## IV. Cohabitation in California

Cohabitation is now widely accepted and practiced in the United States. Nationwide, according to one study, a majority of young adults think that cohabitation is a good way to prepare for marriage.<sup>12</sup> And among currently married U.S. adults ages 18 to 50, about 64% have lived with their spouse before getting married, according to a 2018 IFS/Wheatley survey.

Not surprisingly, support for cohabitation is high in California as well. In fact, a majority of Californians (66%) take the progressive view that living together is just as good as being married, when asked in the California Family Survey.

Some groups are more likely to agree with this statement than others. Attitudes towards living together and actual cohabiting experience vary by education levels, race, and ethnicity.

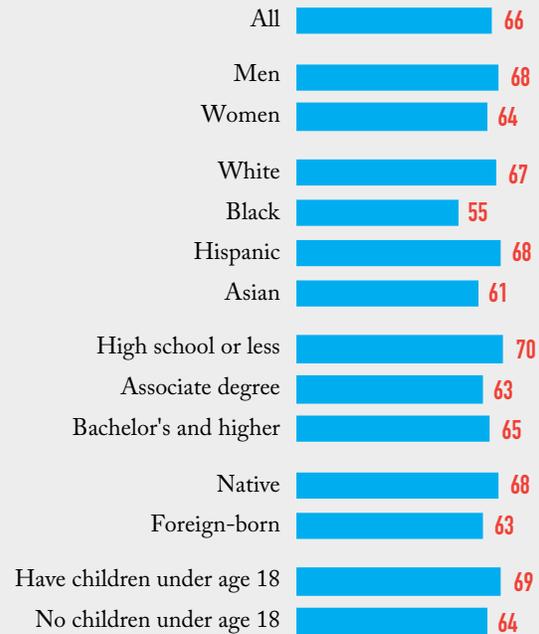
For example, whites and Hispanics in California are more likely than Asians and blacks to see cohabitation as an equal alternative to marriage. And Californians with a high school or less education are also more likely than college-educated adults to view cohabitation as the same as marriage. On the other hand, immigrants are less likely than native-born Californians to agree that cohabitation is as good as marriage.

Parental status also makes a difference. Californians with children are more likely than those without kids to believe that living together is just as good as being married. And the share is higher among parents who are not currently married: about 80% believe that cohabitation is just as good as being married, compared with 65% of those who are married with kids.<sup>13</sup>

Even though most Californians agree that cohabitation is as good as marriage, the share of Californians ages 18 to 50 who currently live with a partner (9%) is slightly lower than the national average (10%). And among Californians with

### Living together is just as good as being married

% agree



Notes: Based on adults ages 18-50.  
Source: IFS California Family Survey.

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<sup>12</sup> Julianne Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, "Public Views of Marriage and Cohabitation," *Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.* (Pew Research Center, November 2019).

<sup>13</sup> When we look at attitudes toward cohabitation among only California parents, similar patterns by demographics apply.

children under age 18, 9% live with an unmarried partner, which is on par with the national rate.

When it comes to combining cohabitation and children, cohabitation is more common among Golden State parents who do not have a college degree, and who are black or Hispanic. Only about 5% of college-educated parents live with a partner, but the share among Californians without a college degree is about 12%. Moreover, 11% of Hispanic parents in California live with a partner, compared with 14% of black parents. The share among white parents is 9%.

Foreign-born Californian parents are less likely than native Californian parents to be in a cohabiting relationship, and the same goes for Asian parents in California, who are the least likely to combine cohabitation and raising children.

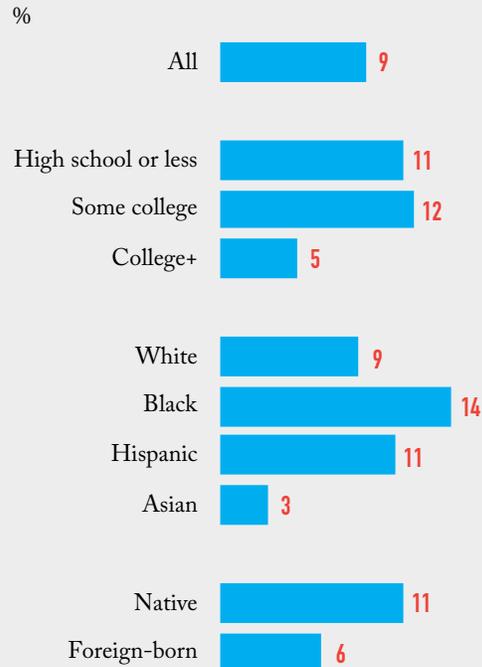
### About 70% of married Californians have lived with their spouse before tying the knot.

Experience with cohabitation is also common among married Californians. In fact, this IFS survey suggests that among currently married adults ages 18 to 50 in California, 69% have lived with their spouse before getting married. The share of men and women reporting pre-marital cohabitation is higher among re-married Californians than those in intact marriages (81% vs. 66%).

Many Californians have experienced cohabitation more than once. And among currently married Californians, 34% have lived with another romantic partner in addition to living with their now-spouse before marriage. The share among married parents is slightly higher (37%).

Digging deeper into Californian attitudes and family outcomes suggests that cohabitation is markedly different from marriage. Even though most Americans and Californians think that cohabitation and marriage are roughly

### College-educated, Asian, and foreign-born California parents are less likely to live with a partner without marriage



Notes: Based on California adults ages 18-50 with children under age 18 at home.  
Source: Current Population Survey, ASEC 2018, IPUMS.

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equivalent, this is not true—at least when it comes to family stability. In the United States, children born to cohabiting parents who do not marry are almost twice as likely to see their parents break up, compared to children born to married parents, even after controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors.<sup>14</sup>

### Cohabiting parents are more likely to have serious doubts about their relationship.

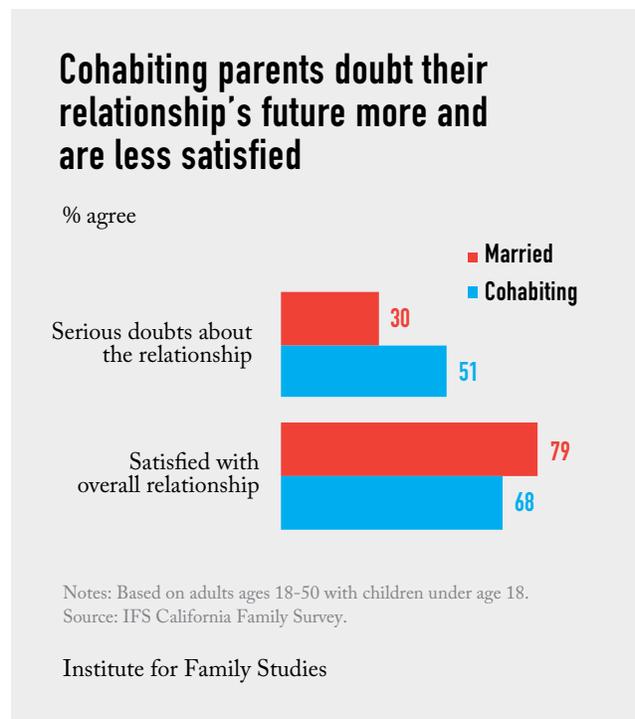
The unstable nature of cohabiting families is echoed by findings from this IFS survey on relationship quality among married and cohabiting couples in California. Cohabiting parents in California are much more likely than married parents to see their relationship as a temporary arrangement. About half of cohabiting couples with children under age 18 seriously doubt that their current relationship will last, compared with 30% of married parents.

Moreover, cohabiting parents are not as happy about their relationship as married parents. Some 68% of cohabiting parents say they are satisfied with their overall relationship with their partner, compared with 79% of married parents.

When it comes to the specific perspectives of the relationships, including the importance of the relationship and feeling close and engaged, cohabiting parents all score lower than married parents. For example, only 55% of cohabiting parents view their relationship with their partner as “more important than almost anything else in life,” compared with 73% of married parents.

As mentioned earlier, cohabiting parents are more common among Hispanics and blacks, as well as among Californians without a college degree. Could the perceived relationship stability and satisfaction differences be due to other differences (such as education, income, race) between cohabiting and married parents rather than marital status per se?

After controlling for sociodemographic factors such as parents’ education, income, age, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, the difference in relationship doubts between cohabiting and married parents remains significant.<sup>15</sup>



<sup>14</sup> Kelly Musick and Katherine Michelmore, “Cross-National Comparisons of Union Stability in Cohabiting and Married Families with Children,” *Demography* 55, no. 4 (August 2018): 1389-1421; Kay Hymowitz, Jason Carroll, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Kelleen Kay, *Knot Yet* (The National Marriage Project, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, and the Relate Institute, 2013)

<sup>15</sup> The regression model also includes gender, whether they are foreign born, and religion.

Cohabiting parents are three times more likely to doubt the future of their relationship, compared to married parents in California. However, the relationship satisfaction gap between the two groups of parents is no longer statistically significant (see Table 2 in Appendix for details). Cohabitation, then, seems more strongly linked to stability than to satisfaction among California parents.

## Among married parents, having more past cohabiting partners is linked to less stable marriages and lower marital satisfaction.

About 1 in 3 married Californian parents (37%) have lived with another romantic partner in addition to their now-spouse before marriage. Compared with parents who did not cohabit or have only lived with their spouse before marriage, parents who have more cohabiting experience are more likely to be uncertain about their marriage.<sup>16</sup> Nearly 40% of married parents who have lived with another partner before their spouse have serious doubts that their marriage will last, compared with only about a quarter of married parents who did not live with another partner. Our results parallel other research indicating that a history of multiple cohabiting partners is linked to greater marital instability.<sup>17</sup>

More cohabiting experience is also linked to somewhat lower levels of overall satisfaction with marriage. But the difference in overall relationship satisfaction between the two groups is not statistically significant after controlling for background factors such as education, income, and race. On the other hand, the association between perceived instability and cohabiting with multiple partners remains robust, even after controlling for a range of potentially confounding factors. Specifically, married parents who cohabited with multiple partners are twice as likely to hold serious doubts about the future of their relationship, compared to married parents who did not cohabit or only cohabited with their future spouse.

## Conclusion

California is the nation's most populous state, housing about 1 in 8 people in the United States. There are also 4.3 million families with children in the state, more than any other state in the union. The Golden State has the nation's largest economy, the most millionaires in the country, and an outsized cultural influence at home and abroad. The state is a demographic, economic, and cultural powerhouse.

Yet *State of Contradiction* reveals a paradox at the heart of California's success. On the one hand, the Golden State, especially through Hollywood and Silicon Valley, has been a global messenger of expressive individualism, personal fulfillment, and tolerance—values associated with progressivism. On the other hand, the families that actually live in the Golden State tend to be traditional. California, as it happens, has a greater share of parents and children residing in intact, married families than is true for the United States in general.

<sup>16</sup> A small group of married parents (n=29) cohabited only with a romantic partner prior to marriage, but not with their spouse. This group is included in the parents who did not cohabit with their spouse before marriage.

<sup>17</sup> Michael J. Rosenfeld and Katherine Roesler, "Cohabitation Experience and Cohabitation's Association with Marital Dissolution," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 81, no. 1 (Feb. 2019): 42-58.

This paradox can be explained in large part by the state's disproportionate share of Asians and especially immigrants. Ironically, Asians and immigrants are at odds with the values of the place where they have settled. They are more likely to reject individualistic values and to instead embrace familistic values and virtues that are more likely to sustain strong and stable marriages. Their familism finds support from the college-educated elites in California, who endorse family diversity in public but are much more marriage-minded in private, especially when children are in the picture. In their own ways, these three groups—Asians, immigrants, and more educated Californians—probably realize that the pathway to educational attainment, financial success, and the American Dream is much more likely to run through stable, married families than the alternatives.<sup>18</sup> And so they live accordingly, even if—in their roles as movie producers, Silicon Valley executives, educators, and doctors—they often lend public voice to the cause of progressive family values.

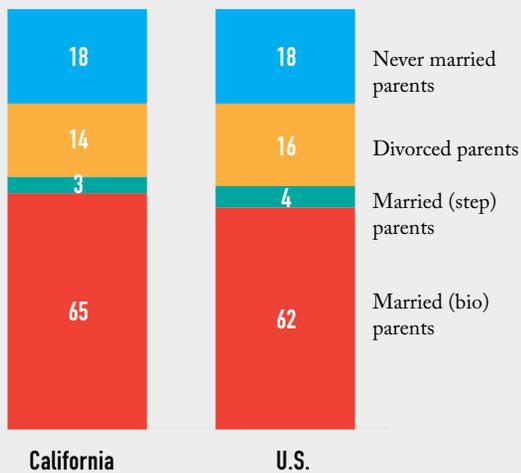
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<sup>18</sup> John Iceland, "Racial and Ethnic Inequality in Poverty and Affluence, 1959-2015," *Population Research and Policy Review* 38 (2019): 615-654; Robert Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, *For Richer, For Poorer* (Institute for Family Studies and AEI, 2014); Melissa Kearney and Phillip Devine, "The Economics of Nonmarital Childbearing and the Marriage Premium for Children," *Annual Review of Economics* 9 (August 2017): 327-352; David C. Ribar, "Why Marriage Matters for Child Wellbeing," *The Future of Children* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 11; J. Wilmoth & G. Koso, "Does marital history matter? Marital status and wealth outcomes among preretirement adults," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64 no. 1 (2002): 254-268.

## Appendix: Additional Charts

### Children's living arrangements in California vs. the U.S.

% of children ages 0-17 who live with...

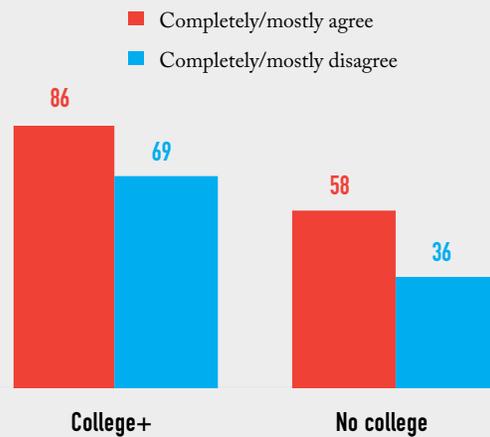


Notes: Children refer to "own children" in the ACS. Divorced parents includes those who are separated or widowed.  
Source: American Community Survey 2017, IPUMS.

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### California parents who value "marriage before baby" are more likely to be in intact marriages, regardless of education

% in intact marriages by agreeing or disagreeing with the statement "It is very important for me, personally, to be married before having children"



Notes: Based on adults ages 18-50 with children under age 18.  
Source: IFS California Family Survey.

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**Table 1. Logistic regression model predicting the odds of parents being in intact marriages**

	Odds ratio		s.e.
<b>Race/ethnicity</b> (vs. white)			
Asian	2.44	*	0.42
Hispanic	0.90		0.19
Black	0.41	**	0.34
Other	1.75		0.37
<b>Foreign-born</b>	1.52	*	0.21
<b>College graduates</b>	2.64	***	0.20
<b>Family income</b> (vs. lower income)			
Middle income	2.01	***	0.20
Higher income	2.47	***	0.21
<b>Personally wish to marry before having children</b>	2.44	***	0.17
<b>N</b>	906		

Notes: \*\*\* p<0.001 \*\*p<0.01 \*p<0.05. Based on California residents ages 18 to 50 with children under age 18. Model also controls for gender, age, religious service attendance.  
Source: IFS California Family Survey.

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**Table 2. Logistic regression models predicting the odds of parents being in a relationship with...**

	Serious doubts		Satisfaction	
	Odds ratio	s.e.	Odds ratio	s.e.
<b>Cohabiting</b> (vs. married)	3.29 ***	0.24	0.81	0.26
<b>Race/ethnicity</b> (vs. white)				
Asian	0.68	0.34	0.79	0.37
Hispanic	0.79	0.20	0.77	0.23
Black	2.11	0.40	0.34 *	0.43
Other	0.44 *	0.39	1.84	0.48
<b>Foreign-born</b>	1.13	0.21	0.84	0.23
<b>College graduates</b>	0.87	0.20	1.19	0.24
<b>N</b>	750		749	

Notes: \*\*\* p<0.001 \*\*p<0.01 \*p<0.05. Based on married or cohabiting California residents ages 18 to 50 with children under age 18. Both models also control for family income, gender, age, religious service attendance, sexual orientation.  
Source: IFS California Family Survey.

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