Marriage and Family Life in Nevada

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Marriage and Family Life in Nevada

Introduction

For almost twenty years, Nevada has been the fastest growing state in the country. Much of this growth is due to numerous immigrant and retiree families moving in every day, creating unique challenges to the state. On the other hand, Nevada’s families, like families in the rest of the United States, are changing in predictable ways. Over the last century, families have become smaller and more diverse. Today, families are not only smaller, but they move more often, have more family members living into old age, enjoy better health, and have more education and wealth than has been true throughout history. There is also more equality across gender, race and income than was true in the past. However, despite the many changes and improvements that have benefited the majority of Nevada families, some negative aspects of earlier trends continue, and new challenges to the least advantaged of Nevada families and children loom on the horizon.

In many early Nevada pioneer families, family members experienced long absences from each other and isolation from their extended families in their marriages and family relationships, but they had a definite notion of the meaning and structure of family. Other early Nevadans lived lifestyles that were incompatible with family life and this may have shaped some of our tolerance and acceptance for a diversity of family forms. As new generations emerged, social and economic conditions brought about many other adaptations and changes from what is generally thought of as ‘traditional family’ in other regions of the country (e.g., unit of two married parents with children). In rural Nevada, small nuclear families evolved to include extended kin networks with strong ties to the land and to each other, and this still characterizes much of rural Nevada today.

These changes present another issue. Unlike the gradual changes experienced by early Nevada families, contemporary families (especially in the urban areas) have undergone relatively rapid and sweeping changes in family formation, roles within families, and the
composition of households, which have occurred in response to recent social and economic conditions. In spite of the continuing importance of “family” in Nevada in the first part of the 21st Century, departures from traditional concepts of family have created a situation wherein law, language, social customs, and life styles do not always intersect to produce a common understanding of “family.”

This report offers an overview of marriage, divorce, and family life in Nevada, including comparisons of Nevada’s statistics with those of the U.S. as a whole. Family transitions and wellness issues that place children and families at risk are highlighted, as well as prospects for the future of Nevada’s families and specific policy recommendations.

State-wide Data in the National Context

The trend for families around the globe has been for postponing marriage, for couples (of all kinds) to have fewer children, for divorce to increase as development advances, and for both marriage and divorce rates to fall across recent decades. In the US, these trends generally hold. Age at first marriage has increased, the proportion of adults who choose to marry has decreased, couples have fewer children, and there is a far greater diversity of individual life styles and family designs than in the past (e.g., never married, child-free, single, married, divorced, remarried, divorced again). In Nevada, families mirror a number of national trends. In the Silver State and the rest of the United States, fewer people are marrying today than in past decades. Nationally both marriage rates and divorce rates are declining. When, and if, marriage does occur, this happens at an older age.

- By 2000, the age at first marriage had increased to 25.5 years for women and 27 years for men. This is almost five years later than in 1960 but is consistent with the age of first marriage at the turn of the last century.

Also, as more couples cohabit before marriage or instead of marriage, the age at first marriage increases as well. Changing economics, as well as increases in the number of women pursuing
higher education, and increased participation of women in the labor force are major influences affecting the delay of age at first marriage. These factors, in turn, influence the decision to postpone childbearing and to have fewer children. As a result,

- There are fewer married couples with children under age 18 living with them than there are married couples who do not live with their children – either because their children are grown or because they did not have children.
- The number of households composed of related individuals residing together (family) has declined from nearly 9 of 10 (88%) households in 1960 to less than 7 of 10 (66%) households in 2005.

While married couples with no children present are the most common household type in Nevada, non-family households (i.e., single or unrelated householders living together) are the fastest growing household type in Nevada, followed by single-parent households. An adult Nevadan is more likely to live in a “non-family” household than ever before. In regard to family households,

- The percent of Nevada children living with two parents has declined from 85% (1960) to 69% (2005).

Although the trends for Nevada’s families have a lot in common with those for the nation, some trends are unique. According to population statistics on Nevada compiled by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the number of new households in Nevada has been growing at a faster rate than the addition of new families to the population.

- Since 1960, Nevada’s population has increased seven fold. However, the average household size has decreased from 3.02 (1960) to 2.6 (2005). During the same period, non-family households have increased from 3% in 1960 to 34% of all households today.

There also has been a smaller but steady increase in the proportion of households that are headed by single parents. These trends suggest that policies and programs designed to meet the needs of
Nevada’s families will, in many cases, be somewhat different from those of other states with different demographics.

As the state moves into the 21st Century, many of these trends are expected to continue, and new trends are emerging. In particular, family structures are becoming more diverse and less familiar, and a broader range of family types is becoming more common. In addition, social and economic changes and increased diversity are putting pressure on Nevada’s families not only to fulfill the usual functions of the “traditional” family, but at the same time to adapt and respond to unfamiliar demands and challenges. Empowering families to meet new challenges should be a primary concern for policy makers, employers, educators, legislators, medical and legal personal, human service professionals and others who are responsible for the welfare of children and families.

**Family Transitions**

Changes in family structure are created when men and women marry, have children, divorce, remarry, and when the children leave home or one of the family members dies. Some of these transitions are normal and predictable, such as getting married, having children, and being widowed in later life. Others, like divorce and remarriage, are not usually in one’s life plan, but they are realities that many of Nevada’s citizens encounter over the life course. Currently, rates of divorce and remarriage are high, and these transitions have important implications for the functioning and well-being of families.

There are common misunderstandings about what the divorce rate means. The divorce rate is calculated as the number of divorces per 1000 divided by the number of marriages per 1000, for a given year.

- In the U.S. population in 2003, there were 3.8 divorces per 1000 and 7.5 marriages per 1000 (the commonly reported divorce rate of about 50%).

It is important to note that the couples marrying in 2003 were not the ones who divorced in that year, so the two figures are
unrelated. To calculate a true divorce rate would require tracking and analyzing data on large samples of married couples over period of decades. Longitudinal studies of this nature have documented that

- The real divorce rate in the U.S. is about 31%, and that the rate of divorce among college graduates (almost 20%) is about half that of non-college graduates.

**Historical Overview**

A historical context is useful for understanding the laws, policies, and practices related to divorce and remarriage that are currently in place in the U.S. and Nevada. The history of divorce in America reflects social and economic trends from the Colonial period up to the present. In the North, colonies regarded marriage as a civil contract that could be broken in cases where adultery, abandonment, and cruelty could be documented. However, such dissolutions rarely occurred. The relatively few cases of divorce in the Northern colonies were granted to men, mostly because of adultery. Prior to 1774, no woman had petitioned for divorce from an adulterous husband, and only 6 women were granted divorces due to adultery in the next 12 years. Southern colonies recognized legal separations, but not divorce. Therefore, desertion was the most common response to a difficult marriage in the southern colonies.

Over time, divorce laws and procedures gradually changed to become more sympathetic to women. During the revolutionary era, women were increasingly successful in obtaining a divorce when their husbands were adulterous, and in the early nineteenth century, states expanded the grounds for divorce to include intemperance and mental cruelty.

- In the early 1900’s, about two-thirds of all divorces were granted to women, and 44% of these divorces were granted on the ground of cruelty.

Unfortunately, women who were granted divorce in the late nineteenth century seldom received child support or alimony. They
did, however, increasingly gain access to child custody during this time period, with the shifting cultural emphasis on the importance of motherhood and childhood, and the “tender years’ doctrine” that favored mothers over fathers became the prevailing standard for determining custody in the courts.

Divorce became a major social issue when the divorce rate dramatically increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading to a prolonged debate over the cultural meaning of divorce. Liberals and feminists thought that divorce laws should not interfere with personal freedom and happiness, whereas conservatives viewed divorce as the product of female selfishness and lack of morality. The views of conservatives prevailed, resulting in stricter residency requirements for those seeking divorce and greater restrictions on remarriage. However, tougher divorce laws had little effect on the growing number of men and women petitioning to end their marriages.

The 20th century was marked with a gradual rise in the divorce rate through the 1920’s, a decline during the early years of the great depression, followed by an increase in the late 1930’s and a sharp increase in divorces during and shortly after World War II. The divorce rate in America was the highest in 1946, and then declined before leveling off in the 1950s and 1960s. By the mid 1960s, the divorce rate was climbing again, peaking in the 1970s and then leveling off in the 1980s (see figure 1 in the Supplementary Materials Section).

- Only about 5% of marriages ended in divorce just after the civil war, compared and estimated 36% a century later
- Divorce rates more than doubled from 10.6 per 1,000 in 1965 to 22.8 in 1979.
- Delayed marriage and an increase in cohabitation account for some of the stabilization of the divorce rate starting in the 1980s.

Following the war, marriage expectations changed radically, with a new emphasis on romantic and sexual fulfillment, increased tensions over finances and the use of leisure time, and shifting attitudes toward women’s employment and economic self-
sufficiency. These changes were accompanied by more expansive definitions of cruelty as a ground for divorce and a shift toward the notion of a consensual (no-fault) divorce.

Ever-higher marital expectations, resurgence of the feminist movement, the growing number of women entering the labor force, and the adoption of no-fault divorce by almost every state are considered the primary reasons why the divorce rate has increased so dramatically in the latter half of the twentieth century.

No-fault divorce and dividing assets equally as “community property” were originally introduced as a progressive steps that would end the acrimony, fraud, and collusion associated with an adversarial system of divorce, but these changes have had unintended economic consequences for women and children. Most divorced fathers have minimal parenting, household, and financial responsibilities when compared with their former wives, therefore they have greater opportunities to develop their careers, and increase their income. Custodial mothers, on the other hand, have numerous obligations at home which, with no partner to help, make it difficult to balance work and family, and they have fewer opportunities in the workplace due to gender discrimination.

Over time, American men and women have come to expect a lot from marriage and when their expectations are not met, divorce is considered a rational alternative in a society dedicated to individual happiness. The divorce rate, therefore, is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. This issue is particularly relevant for Nevada as it has the highest divorce rate in the nation (see Table 2 in the Supplementary Materials Section).

**Divorce in Nevada**

Currently, Nevada is a no fault divorce state, which allows couples who agree to the terms of the divorce (e.g., custody, visitation, spousal support, division of assets and liabilities) to file legal documents and receive a final decree of divorce in a short period of time. State law requires that at least one party to the divorce must have resided in a county in Nevada for at least 6 weeks prior to filing for the divorce in that county. To file for divorce, either the
husband or wife needs to file an application and pay a filing fee ($152). If the couple has children, they also need to complete a mandatory “Children Cope with Divorce” course. The three-hour course is offered at various times and locations across the state.

Officially, the Nevada Revised Statutes (NRS 125.450 through NRS 125.520) provide guidelines for determining the custody of children in accordance with the “best interests of the child,” without regard to the gender of the parents. In practice, however, custody is still granted more often to mothers than to fathers.

- In the 2000 census count, 21.2% of Nevada’s family households were headed by a single mother, and 9.3% were headed by a single father. Comparable figures for the U.S. were 21.9% of family households headed by a single mother and 6.3% headed by a single father.
- Nevada is ranked 2nd in the nation, following Alaska, in the proportion of single-parent families headed by a father.

Nevada has specific guidelines for determining the amount of child support to be awarded to the custodial parent, based on the non-custodial parent’s gross monthly income:

- 1 child = 18%
- 2 children = 25%
- 3 children = 29%
- 4 children = 31% (add an additional 2% for each additional child)

However, these guidelines are subject to a “presumptive maximum amount” for various categories of income (see table 1 in appendix).

**Analysis of the Impact of Family Transitions on Children**

**Separation and divorce**

Separation, divorce, and remarriage are hard on parents and even harder on their children. The major problems for children include poor performance in school as well as emotional and behavioral difficulties. Researchers have estimated that the risk for negative
outcomes is two to three times higher for children of divorce than for children living with both parents. As a result:

- Children of divorce have lower levels of educational achievement that affect their occupational and economic opportunities throughout life.
- Nearly 30% of children from divorce families have serious behavioral problems that affect their development, compared to only 10% of children living with both parents.
- Children of divorce are more prone to emotional difficulties such as depression, jealous behavior, negativity, moodiness, stonewalling, and being excessively critical of others.
- Children of divorce and remarriage are more likely to divorce themselves, and they have weaker ties to their parents compared to children with continuously married parents. These children are more disengaged, see their parents less often, and are less likely to provide or receive assistance with finances and care giving. Relationships with fathers often are more strained than those with mothers.

For many children, these problems started long before their parent’s troubled marriages ended and the problems worsen when the parents separate. For some, the problems continue well into adulthood, affecting their ability to maintain stable intimate relationships.

There is general agreement among researchers and practitioners that loss of economic and interpersonal resources account for most of the decline in children’s functioning following family disruption. Policy makers want to know which of the two is most detrimental to children’s outcomes, and the answer seems to be that it depends on the outcome being assessed.

Separation and divorce usually lower household income, which forces families to move to poorer neighborhoods, where the children attend lower quality schools and are exposed to undesirable peer groups or, at a minimum, face many simultaneous adjustments and transitions to changes and new demands in their changed environment. Consequently, lack of economic resources is considered the single most important factor leading to poor school
performance, high dropout rates, low levels of education, and it increases the likelihood that children will get involved in aggressive and destructive activities.

Most separating parents are embroiled in powerful feelings of loss, confusion, and conflict over the end of their relationship. As a result, parental depression and hostility likely increase after separation, making the parents less emotionally available to children and more inconsistent and harsh in their parenting. This depletion of interpersonal resources in the family explains children’s emotional and behavioral problems, but has little effect on the decline in children’s school performance.

Researchers and practitioners agree that effective parenting is the single most important variable regulating children’s emotional and behavioral difficulties following separation and divorce. Economic resources play a secondary role. This helps to explain why cohabitation and remarriage, both of which substantially raise the household income of single mothers, do not contribute to improvement in children’s well-being. Thus, for families in transition, policies to improve economic resources in the household and the quality of schools certainly help, but they are not likely to have as much impact as policies designed to enhance the psychological health of parents, their ability to monitor conflict, and their quality of parenting.

**Cohabitation and Remarriage**

Cohabitation and remarriage create another major transition in the lives of children who already have been traumatized by the separation of their parents. With separation and divorce, one or more family members leave the household. When a stepfamily is formed, new family members join the household. Both of these transitions can be extremely difficult for children, depending on the timing and magnitude of the change.

The **Stepfamily Association of America** ([www.stepfamilies.info](http://www.stepfamilies.info)) has identified 72 different pathways that lead to the formation of stepfamilies. Some children go through parental separation, followed by a period when they live in a single-parent family, and
then witness the arrival of a stepparent. Others move directly into a stepfamily arrangement following the separation of their parents. Still others have lived with a single parent from birth, and then become stepchildren when the parent eventually marries. Cohabitation is considered another pathway to stepfamily formation, even though these arrangements are often unstable and lack the legal protections provided by marriage. Regardless of how the stepfamily is formed, the transition usually is associated with a chain of events that creates stress and tension for both parents and children, many of whom have already been traumatized by a previous separation or divorce.

Stepfamilies vary in the complexity of their living arrangements, adding to these stresses. In simple stepfamilies, one of the marital partners (usually the wife) has children from a previous relationship, while the other partner does not. Complex stepfamilies, on the other hand, include children from both parents’ earlier relationships, and additional children may be born after the remarriage. Children in complex stepfamilies live with some combination of siblings, stepsiblings, and half siblings. The living arrangements of complex stepfamilies are likely to vary from week to week, with some of the stepchildren dividing their time between the households of their biological parents, while others only visit occasionally. It is also common for children to shift their primary residence from one parent to the other within the first four years of their parents’ separation.

On-the-one-hand, there is substantial evidence that remarriage and cohabitation do not improve the functioning of children living in single-parent families. Children in all three living arrangements are at a disadvantage compared to children living continuously with both parents. Children in single-parent and married or cohabiting stepfamilies have similar rates of difficulty with their adjustment, health, social relationships and educational achievement. Furthermore, these gaps in children’s well-being have been consistently documented across cultures, and they have *increased* in severity over the past decade.
On-the-other-hand, it is important to note that most children who experience family transitions eventually adjust and achieve levels of functioning that are no different than those of children living continuously with both parents. Given that the majority of children who are raised in single parent families and stepfamilies will function normally, the focus needs to be on which children are particularly vulnerable to these living arrangements, and why. The following factors help to explain why some children recover from multiple family transitions, and others do not:

- Children who experience more than two family transitions are at greater risk for school problems, lower educational achievement, and later difficulties forming stable adult relationships.
- Children living with single mothers who have never married usually are at a greater disadvantage, socially and economically, than those living with a divorced mother.
- Mothers in single-parent and stepparent families have rates of depression that are twice as high as mothers in continuously married families, and children with depressed parents are more likely to have adjustment problems.
- Children living in complex stepfamilies have the most frequent and severe adjustment problems, especially when their parents have some combination of mental health problems, marital difficulties, poor parenting skills, financial problems, or a long history of adversity.
- Mothers in never-married single parent families and stepfamilies are more likely to have been pregnant as teenagers, to have left home early, and to have been involved in unstable relationships with multiple partners, compared to mothers in intact families. They also tend to get involved with partners who have similar backgrounds. This gives children a “double dose” of poor role modeling and parenting, as well as greater exposure to multiple family transitions.
- Supportive family relationships are crucial to children’s functioning, and stepparents are less warm, less positive, and less involved with children than their biological parents. The initial hostility of children toward a stepparent may contribute to the problem.
• When **contact with the non-residential parent** is lost, children are more likely to have adjustment problems. When contact is maintained, the quality of the relationship with the non-resident parent is more important than frequency of contact, in enhancing children’s well-being.

• **Parental conflict** with the former or current spouse distresses children and they tend to imitate the aggression and hostility that they have witnessed. On the other hand, a positive relationship between the parent and stepparent sometimes distracts the parent’s attention away from the child, leading to a sense of abandonment by the residential parent.

• **Sibling relationships** can provide comfort to children living in single-parent or stepfamilies, but step-sibling attachments are weaker than those of biological or half-siblings. Therefore the quality of the relationship between siblings and half-siblings is more important than the step-sibling relationship in enhancing children’s well-being and adjustment.

• **The age of the child** makes a difference in adjustment. With separation and divorce, preschoolers are likely to fear that both parents will abandon them, those between 5 and 8 years of age blame themselves, and children between the ages of 9 and 12 are likely to align themselves with one parent or the other. Children in middle childhood and adolescence have the most difficulty adjusting to a new stepparent.

• **The gender of the child also makes a difference.** Boys have more problems than girls in the first years following separation, and they initially form more positive relationships with stepfathers, but these gender differences disappear over time.

**Legal Issues Related to Divorce and Remarriage**

Decisions in family law still reflect the presumption that only one parent, usually the mother, is responsible for caring for the child, while the other parent provides financial support. Consequently, custody is “awarded” to mothers more than fathers, with an adversarial “winner take all” approach to resolving child-custody disputes.
Four major research findings call into question the effectiveness of current custody practices in meeting the needs of children:

- Children of divorce want and need equal time with each parent, or at least as much time with each parent as they had before the divorce.
- Children living in shared custody arrangements do significantly better on all adjustment measures than those living in sole custody arrangements.
- Shared custody works for parents too. Over time, conflict decreases and cooperation increases in shared custody arrangements, while the opposite is true in sole custody arrangements.
- The presumption that mothers provide the majority of child care is wrong. Equal responsibility for child care is the norm for the majority of married parents, and it is emerging as the norm in divorced families in cases where child custody is not disputed.

Currently, court decisions are presumably based on the “best interests of the child,” but in reality, they serve to protect the rights of the parents. The protection of parental rights carries with it claims and counter-claims, allegations and counter-allegations, numbers and calculations. Divorcing families need a more humane process that helps parents refocus their attention away from their own issues to the harmful effects of divorce and how they can cooperate to reduce the risk of harm and meet their children’s needs. Advocates of divorce law reform want a standard of shared parental responsibility that would help refocus attention away from parental rights toward children’s needs, and the obligations of both parents and society to meet those needs.

The shared parental responsibility and harm reduction approach to divorce law reform has four components:

- Parents must develop a parenting plan that focuses on reducing the harms associated with divorce and sharing parental responsibility for the children’s needs, before a court hearing is held on matters related to the divorce. Parents are expected to use mediation, attorney negotiation, and parent
education to help them agree on a plan. If a joint plan is not possible, each parent develops a separate plan for judicial review.

- Existing parent-child relationships are expected to continue after the divorce, with post-divorce arrangements reflecting the relative amount of time each parent spent with the child prior to the separation.
- In cases of custody dispute, shared parental responsibility or equal time with each parent will be the default position of the court.
- Child protection will be the overriding concern in cases where a parent has an established history of abuse or domestic violence (as documented by criminal conviction and child protection agencies).

Variations in parenting plans have been successful in a number of different situations. One approach that has received increasing attention is a parenting plan where the parents alternate living in the family home with the children and a second home is maintained for their separate residence (e.g., the parents move back and forth between homes, while the children stay in place).

**Stepparent Rights and Obligations**

The shared responsibility and harm reduction approach to divorce law reform is a standard that could be applied to remarriage as well as divorce. Diverse family arrangements and relationships are generally ignored in family law, and public policies tend to be biased in favor of the nuclear family with little legal protection for stepparents and stepchildren. Furthermore, federal and state policies are typically at odds with each other in their treatment of stepfamilies.

State policies on stepfamilies usually reflect a *stranger model* that views residential stepparents as legal strangers to their stepchildren, with no rights or duties. In most states, stepparents are not required to financially support their stepchildren, although most do voluntarily. In return, a residential stepparent usually has fewer rights than a legal guardian or foster parent (e.g., in signing
permission slips, authorizing medical treatment, or discussing grades with a teacher).

At the other extreme, federal policies tend to reflect a dependency model that assumes that residential stepparents financially support their stepchildren. This assumption allows the federal government to limit benefits to stepchildren that dependent children are otherwise eligible to receive (e.g., TANF, Social Security, student loan programs), based on the stepparent’s income.

Two basic tenets of family law are generally used in determining parental rights and obligations. The first rule, parental rights doctrine establishes the legal priority of the biological parents over all other adults in a child’s life. The second rule, parenthood as an exclusive status, allows a child to have a maximum of two legal parents, who claim full parental rights and obligations that are shared with no one else. The only way that a third parental figure (e.g., an adoptive parent, stepparent, or grandparent raising a grandchild) can be granted legal rights is through the termination of the rights of one of the biological parents. As a result, creating a new parent-child relationship entails legally nullifying at least one preexisting parent-child relationship.

The importance of continuity and stability in children’s lives following divorce of their biological parents or parent and stepparent is undisputed. Legally, step-relationships cease to exist when the marriage ends. Therefore, in most cases the stepparent has no right to petition for custody or visitation following divorce, and if the stepparent dies, stepchildren have no legal rights to inheritance. In some cases, children have lived with a stepparent since early childhood, and the loss of contact with someone who was a parent figure for years can be devastating.

A more inclusive legal definition of family is needed to permit stepfamilies to more easily honor the psychological attachments and support that exist in step-relationships, while continuing to honor the legal rights and relationships of biological parents. One option would be to replace the parenthood as an exclusive status model with the accumulation model which recognizes that multiple parents cooperating in extended family networks provide the highest
potential for enhancing children’s social and emotional well-being. Just as parents can have multiple children and love them all equally, children can have multiple parents and form strong, non-exclusive attachments with each of them. Maintaining multiple parental relationships in stepfamilies, where all parents work together in the best interests of the children, legitimizes the role of each parental figure in a child’s life, minimizes loyalty conflicts and normalizes stepfamily experiences. Great Britain’s Children’s Act of 1989 offers a model that supports this perspective:

- Residence orders permit stepparents to voluntarily assume and share parental rights and responsibilities with biological parents.
- Adoption by a stepparent is “open,” providing the “terminated” non-custodial parent with enforceable visitation rights.
- Stepparent support obligations are balanced with parental rights, and these rights and duties are spelled out for the duration of the marriage, and should the marriage end.
- The stepparent is given legal standing and a fair chance to be granted custody and/or visitation following divorce or the death of the biological parent.

When children’s needs (rather than parental rights) are the central focus of social and legal policies, children’s meaningful relationships with both parents, both sets of biological grandparents, and stepparents and their kin are protected. The parental responsibility standard engages all parent figures in a child’s life, and shifts the focus from competition for custody and the children’s affection to collective efforts to reduce the harm caused by disruptive family transitions, and provide abundant resources to meet children’s physical and emotional needs.

**Family Wellness Issues**

Society is increasingly called upon to redefine, support, and complement family efforts to carry out its functions. Therefore there is an increased need for public policies to address a wide array of pressing family issues, including but not limited to those associated with divorce and remarriage. Other issues encompass: child and elder care, appropriate health care for all citizens, suitable
opportunities for all qualified youth to gain post secondary education, means to prevent homelessness and insure adequate housing for all families, and strategies to decrease youth and adult unemployment and underemployment. In addition, society is called upon to provide family life education, prevention and treatment for domestic violence, child neglect and abuse, individual and relational counseling, and training for transition to independent living. In areas of regulation and protection, society must provide for insurance for domestic partners and non-relative householders, family and medical leave, legal protection for members of non-traditional family households (e.g., stepparent, cohabiting, non-parental child guardian), as well as foster children, adoptees and their parents. This list is not exhaustive; other concerns for social conscience and social policy surface frequently. However, one could argue that poverty is the most pressing concern to be addressed by public policy, since it is a condition that exacerbates almost every one of the issues listed above.

**Families and Poverty**

While there were significant declines in poverty in general across the USA (i.e., from 1989 to 1999), the rate of poverty fell least for families with young children. More specifically, our youngest families, particularly those with the youngest children are the most vulnerable and are the most likely to be poor.

- In Nevada people living below the poverty line during this period increased slightly from 10.2% to 10.5%.
- Although the median income of a family of four increased from $24,332 in 1980 to $65,093 in 2003, mothers entering the labor force accounted for much of this increase, and the purchasing power of the dollar actually fell by 42% during this time period.

Insufficient economic resources make it more difficult for families to carry out their protective and nurturing functions. However, poverty is not solely a burden on impoverished families. Poverty also influences **all** Nevadans who pay taxes and share community assets such as education and health programs. All citizens have a stake in the well-being of families and children; our collective fate is bound
up with the well-being of Nevada’s individuals and families, and their willingness and ability to take care of each other and to contribute to the common good of the state. In order for the state to grow and prosper, it is critical that policy empower young families to attain a higher standard of living and to gain a higher level of competence in the nurturance and education of their children. The Nevada KIDS COUNT Databook (2006) estimates that

- About 15% of all children in the state are part of families who live below the poverty line compared to the poverty rate across all age groups which is about 10%.

The effect of poverty for those who live below or just barely above the poverty line goes far beyond merely limiting their access to food, clothing, and shelter. Children living in poverty have social and educational disadvantages, and they are exposed to higher levels of violence and criminal activity than more affluent youth.

It is important to understand that it is not just single-parent families or families on welfare that are poor and suffering. Families in general are finding it increasingly more difficult to avoid poverty or economic marginality, regardless of family structure.

- Across America over 6 million children- more than one-third of all poor children live in working-poor families.
- Contrary to popular thinking, less than 15% of children in working-poor families were born to a teenage mother. Most, in fact, were born to women over age 25.
- One half of children living in working-poor families live in married, two parent households where at least one parent (usually the father) works all year.

Thus, although family poverty is influenced by factors such as single parenthood, it can neither be explained nor eliminated by changes in family structure alone. Creating effective policy to train and employ welfare families is currently mandated in each state by the federal government through the TANF program. But unless policy is developed that will relieve the poverty of the working-poor as well, it seems counterproductive to move more Nevada families into that category where continued poverty is perpetuated (e.g., advocating
for welfare parents to get married as a solution does not make sense). Examination of the above data suggests that such policy must be centered on preparing citizens to be productive adults by creating more and better employment opportunities, rather than focusing on perceived family anomalies from an idealized norm.

When children from economically disadvantaged homes enter school they are more likely to lack basic academic skills and are less ready to learn than their peers from more affluent families. Children who do well in school are more likely to become economically self-sufficient adults and to contribute to family and society. Thus, if all families were able to send their children to school ready to learn, there would be both direct and indirect benefits for the child, family, classmates, the school, community, and ultimately for the state. Failure to provide adequate access to resources and appropriate stimulation for young children detracts from their physical and emotional health. It also lowers future levels of educational and occupational attainment, and undercuts preparation for adulthood, including employment, parenthood, and citizenship. Lower performance in these areas leads to higher public expenditures for family and individual support, remedial services and correction, adds demands for subsequent taxes to solve state problems, and becomes a threat to shared Nevada common good.

**Transition to Parenthood and Poverty**

Age at first parenthood is a strong predictor of economic difficulty for families with children. Young parents, particularly unwed mothers, are likely to have insufficient education and experience to make a successful transition to an independent adult life which does not require government transfer payments and assistance from their parents and other family members. Those who bear the burden of young single parenthood are the young parents (mothers in particular), their children, the young parents’ families-of-origin, and all tax-paying citizens. Policy and programs to prevent adolescent pregnancy and to avert subsequent adolescent pregnancies must be targeted to both sexes, to families of origin, and involve communities as well as schools. Policy directions that target more community involvement, better prevention education
for males and females, more access to community resources, and more accountability for the reduction of mother-infant and child poverty are the most urgent challenges for Nevada as we enter the twenty-first century.

**Divorce and Poverty**

The divorce rate in Nevada is considerably above the US average, but child support collection is below the national average. The economic reality is that the preference for maternal custody places children at a disadvantage. Nevada’s legal system continues to struggle to resolve economic inequities between divorced parents.

- Since 1960, the custody of about nine out of 10 children whose parents divorce has been awarded by the courts to mothers. The median earnings of women are only 75% of those of men.
- Nevada court ordered collections of child support payments succeed in collecting and distributing only about half (51.1%) of current child support (2004) even with the enormous amounts of time and energy are expended in collection efforts.

Less adversarial means of keeping non-custodial parents involved in their children’s lives are important, not only for financial reasons, but also for the social and emotional well-being of children. Children need continued relationships with both parents, whenever possible. Legalistic processes reward the aggressive self-interest of parents with little regard for the real and comprehensive needs of children. There is an urgent need for new policy that relies on degreed family professionals to help mediate and arbitrate cases before coercive and invasive court interventions take place. Family professionals are better prepared to strengthen and support divorcing families than are judges, lawyers, or clinicians who are likely to assume that divorcing families are already “broken.”

**Single-Parent Families and Poverty**

There is a strong relationship between single parenthood and family poverty, which persists whether the parent union dissolves before or after children are born, whether or not the parents were ever married, or are divorced. Single parents and their children are more
likely to experience poverty, and subsequently rely on welfare. Although many single parent families function well and are strong, there are disproportionate numbers of single parent families with serious problems compared to two parent families. The rate of single parenting is related to child poverty; single parenting is also associated with children’s lower educational attainment, poorer mental and physical health, and other problems. Future directions in policy must consider whether there are ways to lower the rate of single parenthood, identify single-parent families most at risk, and support better outcomes for single parents and their children in general. Several suggestions are listed in the earlier sections of this chapter.

**Stepfamilies and Poverty**

The United States has the highest remarriage rate in the world. It is estimated that

- In nearly half of marriages registered in the U.S. (47%), one or both people have been married at least once before; most of these remarriages involve children.

Given the growing proportion of step families it is increasingly important to clarify the legal status of Nevada step parents. Step families generally involve three or more parents who often do not agree about parental rights, responsibilities, and privileges, so that step parents’ roles are exceedingly ambiguous. Parental rights concerning their step children are enormously very limited, yet society expects them to take on obligations for being responsible and effective parents to their step children. Economic difficulties are prevalent among complex families where parents may have financial obligations for children living in two or more households. It is urgent that laws and services for step families be expanded and become more sensitive and supportive of this growing family form. At the same time, policy must balance concerns and relationships of children and their non-custodial parents to remain a part of their children’s lives.

**Children and Poverty**
Research has shown that poverty effects not only family and child well-being of their immediate lives but their longer term interests. Compared to children from more affluent families, poor children are, for example, likely to achieve at lower levels in school, to drop out of school, and to have more health, behavior, and emotional problems. Their parents are likely to experience more marital as well as physical and mental health problems. The effects of poverty on families and children are ultimately borne not just by those children and families but by all who share schools, health systems and hospitals, roads, etc.

- In Nevada more than 40,000 children under the age of six are in some kind of licensed child-care.

While the consequences of welfare reform are not yet known, it is likely that it will contribute a flood of children who need high quality child care that is affordable and available, to allow maternal employment. If so, this will certainly add pressure to an already strained capacity to provide quality care for our most vulnerable citizens. Scholars and practitioners agree that young children require well educated care givers and lower ratios of staff to children to meet the children’s’ many developmental needs. If child care workers, professional staff, and adequate building environments are to be provided for the growing needs of Nevada pre-school children, several years of lead time for funding initiatives, educating workers, and establishing child care facilities must be addressed immediately.

**Elders and Poverty**

While some groups of persons aged 65 and older have experienced improvement in overall economic well-being, other elderly Nevadans are increasingly economically handicapped. While Nevada has a sizeable group of older adults who migrated to the state and who have adequate assets for a comfortable retirement, many of the elderly settling in Nevada have left behind their extended families and life-long support networks, which puts them at risk should they later experience medical or financial problems. Among those who have lived in Nevada prior to retirement, a substantial number has had limited lifelong job and economic opportunities, so that many of
our citizens are living their later years at or below the poverty level. Ironically, those who have been denied education and good jobs earlier in life find themselves further disadvantaged in their old age, mostly because they have had few opportunities in their earlier lives. Poverty among the elderly has negative effects on the health, residential independence, wellbeing, and general quality of life for both individuals and their families. Some groups of citizens are at greater risk of poverty in their later years than others. Women, minorities, and those residing in inner cities or in the most remote rural areas, are more likely to experience poverty in later life.

Another group of elderly at risk for poverty and social isolation includes those who have experienced divorce earlier in life. When either parents or their adult children have divorced, social, emotional, and economic exchanges between generations are adversely affected. Remarriage in either generation tends to further weaken intergenerational ties. The long-term consequences of divorce and remarriage on family stability and economic well-being are well-documented. Research and policy need to be directed toward understanding these consequences and the pressures that are likely to be placed on social services to the elderly in the coming years, as increasing numbers of divorced individuals retire and grow old.

Whatever the circumstances, elderly living in poverty usually are unable to pay for some of the necessities of independent living, including medical care, prescription medicine, or long term care. Elders who have difficulty maintaining their independence most often rely on informal supports, mainly family, to provide help. Unfortunately, there are physical, emotional, and economic consequences to younger family members (particularly women) when they are called on to provide care for older family members. Resentment and strained family relationships often occur when adult siblings refuse to share the responsibility for a parent’s care. The consequences of such strains compromise the extended families’ ability to care for themselves and their dependent children. Further, elders with the highest risks for poverty are often members of families who themselves have the fewest material resources.
Delivery of services is another issue for the elderly. When services outside the family are required, they usually can be efficiently delivered to the elderly living in urban areas, but services to isolated elderly living in rural communities are more complex and expensive to deliver. As the population ages and more individuals survive into their eighties and nineties, poverty among the elderly will demand increasing attention. The challenge for Nevada is to relieve the poverty of the elderly in family-sensitive ways, and to provide more resources and a greater variety of innovative programs for the elderly poor, regardless of where they live.

**Rural and Urban Families**

Both rural and urban Nevada families face unique challenges, as well as some common problems. While 85% of Nevadans are classified as urban, rural variations in population characteristics need to be considered. Thus,

- Rural Nevada children are less likely to be living in single parent families (22%) compared to their urban counterparts (27%) and rural children are less likely to be living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment (30%) than are urban children (35%).
- In Nevada, rural families are less likely to live in poverty (12%) than children elsewhere in Nevada (14%) and rural children and families have access to fewer and less adequate formal services for education, physical and mental health, transportation and public assistance but typically are embedded in better informal networks.

In contrast, urban families often do not have the kinds of informal services and social supports available to rural families. Rural families tend to help each other across generations, in part because they are more apt to live near several households of extended family and life-long friends, and have daily contact with these important others. Rural Nevadans have a heritage of strong family bonds and residential constancy which promotes strong loyalty to each other. Familism, in which the survival and well-being of family tends to be placed above individual concerns, insures that everyone will have greater access to pooled resources (including intra-family
services) in times of need, but which also demands greater obligations from each family member. Familism provides both incentive and obligation to remain tied to a physical locale and a particular group of people, and discourages individuals from leaving their home area for potential individual gain. Residential constancy is thus most encouraged in geographic areas where economic opportunities are likely to be stagnant or diminishing.

**Native American Families**

Native American families are particularly known for familism, strong loyalties to religious and artistic orientations, and to tribal land and traditions. Over the last half century there has been an exodus of residents from many reservations and predominately Native American communities, as some have been forced to leave in order to survive economically. Often these same communities do not have sufficiently strong or diversified economic development to support the families who stay. Native American families who remain often suffer economic hardships; however, families who leave suffer from being separated from the people and places they most value. Those who leave often have higher levels of education and job skills than those who remain. Some have argued that reservations are a kind of “third world within the United States,” suffering from a brain drain from within and indifference from outside interests. Native American families and children may face increasing problems if the pool of human and material resources in their home communities continues to be depleted.

**African American Families**

African American Nevadans face disproportionate economic disadvantage and limited access to many kinds of opportunities, as well as discrimination. Such hardships sometimes overwhelm family resources and contribute to family disruptions. The most frequent type of African American family in Nevada is the single-parent family.

- In 2000, the census reported that 53% of African American children under age 18 lived in single parent families (compared with 16% of Non-Hispanic White children). Thirty percent of
African American children lived in married couple families compared to 79% of other Nevada children, and African American children were three times as likely (29%) to be poor as were Non-Hispanic White children (8.6%).

Because there are much higher proportions of African-American families in urban than in rural areas, policy and programs dedicated to relieving the well-being, educational, economic and job attainment disadvantages of Black families and other smaller minority groups are of special concern to municipalities. In rural areas, inclusiveness must be the focus because smaller proportions of minorities in the population may make their special needs less apparent to policy makers and public service personal.

**Hispanic American Families**

The number of Hispanic residents in Nevada more than doubled between 1990 and 2000, accounting for 10.4% of the state’s population in 1990 and 19.7% in 2000. Currently, more than 20% of Nevada’s population is Hispanic, and only New Mexico, California, Texas, and Arizona have a higher proportion of Hispanics living in their states. More than 80% of Nevada’s Hispanic residents are immigrants, and rapid growth in the Hispanic population has exceeded demographers’ predictions, helping to create national and state concerns about border control and immigration policies.

- Although the percentage of Hispanic children living below the poverty line declined between 1996 (40%) and 1999 (30%), Hispanic children are still twice as likely as non-Hispanic white children to live in poverty, and they are more likely than other children to live in extremely poor neighborhoods.

Hispanic families fare worse than African American and non-Hispanic white families on a number of indicators of family well-being, including education, workforce preparation, health insurance, teen suicide, and nonmarital births. On the positive side,

- Only 4% of Hispanic births are to mothers who smoke, compared to 10% for African Americans, and 16% for whites,
and Hispanics have the lowest infant mortality rate of all ethnic groups.

Hispanic immigrants help make Nevada a better place to live. Most have lived here for more than 10 years, adding to the stability of Nevada’s communities, and they make major contributions to the state’s key industries: tourism, gaming, and construction. State economists estimate that

- Every dollar earned by Hispanic immigrants creates an additional 55 cents in the state’s economic output. Hispanics contribute to 16.5 percent of the total workforce in Nevada, yet they receive only 8.3% of the state’s total earnings.

It is unclear how much of this discrepancy is due to their job skills and the types of jobs that they hold and how much is due to discrimination and exploitation of immigrants, especially undocumented workers.

**Prospects for the Future and Policy Recommendations**

Nevada is the fastest growing state in the nation, and some of this growth has exceeded demographers’ predictions. Families in every state rely on services and infrastructures to support their functioning, especially in the context of family crisis and distress. In times of rapid growth, these services and infrastructures are strained to the limit. Policy makers and legislators need to have a solid understanding of the issues and the complexities of family life, especially as they apply to diverse family structures and minority families. Otherwise, it is unlikely that they will adequately address the rapidly changing needs of the state’s residents.

The poverty that is disproportionately experienced by certain types of families, including ethnic minorities and those headed by a single parent, is one of the most important issues that need to be addressed. One mechanism for dealing with economic disadvantage is to empower those who are in poverty to break free. Individuals are empowered when opportunities and support are created for the display of competence, and families develop the ability to meet their own needs and aspirations in ways that promote control over family
functioning. Families experiencing chronic poverty have little control over their lives because of a combination of circumstances such as their minimal levels of education, lack of adequate employment, fear of risk taking, and having too many children at very early ages. Empowerment of families may be best accomplished by making resources available for adequate education, job training and employment, and family life education services. In spite of the obvious costs of these empowering efforts toward Nevada families, failure to provide needed resources has a “pay now or pay later” consequence. Families in poverty are more likely to have children who have poor school performance, chaos, increased risk for disrupted schooling and inadequate job attainment, early pregnancy, family instability, difficulties with the law, dependency on public assistance, and disappointing personal relationships now and on into the next generation.

If family prosperity, in all meanings of the word, is to occur, public programs and private efforts must inspire new visions of family empowerment and full participation in citizenship. Such efforts must furnish appropriate means for establishing stable family life, developing parenting skills, involvement in their own and children’s education, community participation, successful employment, support for nurturing other family members (e.g., elders), and a sense of control and self-direction.

Education and training of disadvantaged individuals and families are not enough to strengthen families or to improve the quality of life in Nevada households. For many families, quality of life includes wanting and needing to remain in their current communities. Attracting or creating businesses that will offer livable wages, using natural and human resources from the area, and the creation and implementation of family support services that make employment possible (e.g., elder care, child care, family life education programming, and family friendly work environments) are essential elements of creating prosperity in Nevada families. Families prosper when they are given adequate access to appropriate resources, and encouraged to meet their own needs in a competent, non-dependent manner.
Conclusion

Examination of disadvantaged families in Nevada leads to the conclusion that poverty underlies most problems, and that the root cause of most poverty is attributable to jobs that do not offer a livable wage and inadequate educational and preparation, and family functioning. Given the data reviewed in this chapter, it is unrealistic to think that jobs that do not provide a livable wage or insufficient public support (or inadequate minimum wage) will create prosperity for Nevada families. Although welfare reform of a decade ago was an opportunity for the state to set policy and fund goals which could empower families, there is now a larger and more troubling need for adequate policy and funding to address the plight of the working poor.

The trends and emerging realities outlined in this paper are likely to continue into the early decades of this new century. There is no “quick fix.” Constructive, courageous, and informed public policy decisions will be required to move disadvantaged families toward empowerment and self-sufficiency.

Nevada families are experiencing many of the requisite changes to improve our state in the future. New families with ambition, optimism, and a belief in the future promise the energy and potential for positive change. While there are many daunting challenges, there are also promising signs that augur great possibilities for tomorrow.

Data Sources and Suggested Readings


Nevada Revised Statutes, [http://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs](http://www.leg.state.nv.us/nrs)


Poverty in America: Living Wage Calculator, [http://www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu/](http://www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu/)


**Community resources**

Building a Healthy Nevada (a project of the College of Health and Human Sciences at the University of Nevada, Reno): [http://www.buildingahealthynevada.com/](http://www.buildingahealthynevada.com/)

Children, Youth and Families Education and Research Network (CYFERnet), [www.cyfernet.org](http://www.cyfernet.org)

Clark County Legal Services, 800 South Eighth Street, Las Vegas, NV 89101-7051, (702) 386-1070, [www.clarkcountylegal.com](http://www.clarkcountylegal.com)

Family Resource Centers: A list of centers throughout the state of Nevada is available at [www.hr.state.nv.us/directors/famresource/famresctr.htm](http://www.hr.state.nv.us/directors/famresource/famresctr.htm)

Health Access Washoe County, 1055 South Wells Avenue, Suites 100, 110, 120, & 150, Reno, NV 89502, (775) 329-6300, [www.hawcinc.org](http://www.hawcinc.org)

National Council on Family Relations, [www.ncfr.org](http://www.ncfr.org)

Nevada Division of Child & Family Services, 711 East 5th Street, Carson City, NV 89701, (775) 684-4400, [www.d dfs.state.nv.us](http://www.d dfs.state.nv.us)
Nevada Hispanic Services, 3905 Neil Road, Suite #2, Reno, NV 89502, (775) 826-1818, www.nhsreno.org

Nevada Kids Count, http://kidscount.unlv.edu


Southern Nevada Health District, Ravenholt Public Health Center, 625 Shadow Lane, Las Vegas, NV 89127, (702) 759-1000, www.cchd.org

United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra, 811 Ryland Street/P.O. Box 2730, Reno, NV 89505-2730, (775) 322-8668, www.uwayreno.org

United Way of Southern Nevada, 1660 E. Flamingo Road, Las Vegas, NV 89119, (702) 734-CARE (2273), www.uwsn.org

Washoe County District Health Department, 1001 E. 9th Street, Building B, Reno, NV 89512, (775) 328-2410, www.co.washoe.nv.us/health

Washoe Legal Services, 650 Tahoe Street, Reno, NV 89509, (775) 329-2727, www.washoelegalservices.org

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Stephan M. Wilson, Ph.D., CFLE (Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Health and Human Sciences and Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies) and Jeanne Hilton, Ph.D., CFLE (Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies), University of Nevada, Reno NV 89557-0131. Telephone: 775-784-6490. Email: swilson@unr.edu or hilton@unr.edu
Supplementary Materials

Table 1. Presumptive Maximum Amount of Child Support for the State of Nevada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INCOME RANGE If the parent’s gross monthly income is at least</th>
<th>But less than</th>
<th>Presumptive maximum amount the parent will be required to pay per month per child will be</th>
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<td>$500</td>
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<tr>
<td>4,168</td>
<td>$4,168</td>
<td>$550</td>
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<tr>
<td>12,501</td>
<td>12,501</td>
<td>$750</td>
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Source: Nevada Revised Statutes

Table 2. State Ranking of Annual Divorces per 1,000 population

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<th>Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Divorces per 1000 population</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Divorces per 1000 population</th>
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</thead>
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<td>Virginia</td>
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<td>Maryland</td>
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<td>Montana</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>Missouri</td>
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<td>Alabama</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
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<td>West Virginia</td>
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<td>Total Population 15 years and older</td>
<td>Percent Married</td>
<td>Percent Divorced</td>
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<td>Nye County</td>
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<td>Washoe County</td>
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<td>52.2</td>
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<td>White Pine County</td>
<td>7,353</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>11.4</td>
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</table>

Source: Census 2000 American Factfinder

**Table 3.** Percent Married and Divorced in Nevada’s Counties

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**Figure 1.** Trends in the U.S. Divorce Rate: 1950-2000
*This report stems from the Justice & Democracy forum on the Leading Social Indicators in Nevada that took place on November 5, 2004, at the William S. Boyd School of Law. The report, the first of its kind for the Silver State, has been a collaborative effort of the University of Nevada faculty, Clark County professionals, and state of Nevada officials. The Social Health of Nevada report was made possible in part by a Planning Initiative Award that the Center for Democratic Culture received from the UNLV President's office for its project "Civic Culture Initiative for the City of Las Vegas." Individual chapters are brought on line as they become available. For further inquiries, please contact authors responsible for individual reports or email CDC Director, Dr. Dmitri Shalin shalin@unlv.nevada.edu.