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The American family isn't collapsing, it's adapting to reality | Opinion

This is the shift that unsettles older generations: a vision of the American dream untethered from property or possessions, rooted instead in lived experience and personal autonomy.

Andrew Sciallo Opinion contributor

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Parenting can be a great joy, but it can also take a toll on a person's physical and mental well-being if they aren't careful.

When pundits and media talking heads warn that the American family is in decline, what they're really saying is that it looks drastically different today than it did even five years ago.

More young Americans are prioritizing economic survival over marriage, homeownership or having children – not out of selfishness, but out of necessity.

According to a 2025 Investopedia cost analysis, the cumulative price of traditional American milestones – homeownership, health care, childcare,

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education and retirement – now passes $5 million over a lifetime. That figure alone explains why so many people feel disenfranchised.

Research consistently shows that rising housing costs shape family formation. An economic study found that for every 10% increase in home prices, birth rates among non-homeowners dropped by roughly 1%. Demographic research hosted on ResearchGate similarly shows that the lack of affordable housing delays first births and reduces overall fertility.

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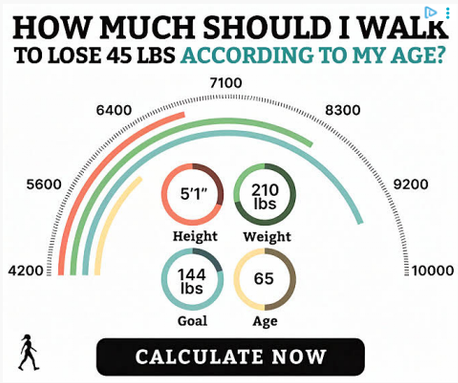

It's a misnomer to say that Generation Z is abandoning the American dream when in reality, the American dream is abandoning them.

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Gen Z's economic reality impacts how we focus on family

To survive an increasingly volatile job market, economic caution has become a defining trait, not just for Gen Z but for millennials and Gen X as well. And that survival instinct comes at a psychological cost. There's a numbing, almost robotic rhythm to American life: work, sleep, repeat. Even those fortunate enough to remain employed feel trapped in an endless cycle of productivity.

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Nowhere is this more visible than in New York City, where I live and teach. Happy hour bars in Manhattan are packed every evening – not with friends but coworkers. Introductions begin not with "Who are you?" but "What do you do?" Work has come to define identity in America, even though few seem to like the version of themselves it produces.

This overemphasis on career success leaves little time or energy for building families or community. That context matters when discussing the recent fixation on "no contact" families. While estrangement is hardly new, it's now framed as a uniquely Gen Z phenomenon. Why?

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Heavily influenced by social media and gaming, Generation Z also knows how to appreciate the allure of a pre-digital world.

Recently, media therapist Mel Robbins sparked controversy with a New York Times op-ed arguing that going no contact is a mistake. The backlash was swift, drawing responses from wellness influencers, therapists and younger people who saw her argument as disconnected from economic reality.

Younger generations are once again cast as disruptors of tradition – a role once assigned to the baby boomers by the Silent Generation. But what truly reshapes social behavior isn't feelings; it's economics. The cost of living has a greater influence on American life than ideology ever has.

Even the origins of the holiday season seem to tell this story. Much of America's holiday mythology emerged during the early 20th century, shaped by events like the Great Depression and both World Wars. At a time when Americans had less, there was a greater emphasis on connection, ritual and shared hardship.

Today, overconsumption has hollowed out those traditions. A recent survey by the World Happiness Report found that while Americans have more material wealth than most other countries, they have fallen to 24th in the global happiness ranking, their lowest ranking ever.

Yet surveys show that more and more Americans are waking up to the reality that overconsumption does not make one happier. And research finds materialism itself is linked to lower well-being. This, even as fewer and fewer Americans report being satisfied with their lives, according to a 2025 Gallup poll.

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Americans own more than ever, yet they report historically low levels of happiness.

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Gen Z is reevaluating family obligation. Outrage over 'no contact' misses that.

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What truly reshapes social behavior isn't feelings, it's economics. The cost of living has a greater influence on American life than ideology ever has. *Chainarong Prasertthai, Getty Images/iStockphoto*

If there is a silver lining to this economic turmoil, it's that many Americans are becoming more intentional about how they spend their time. Increasingly, people are asking: What actually makes my life meaningful? What is my version of the American dream?

For many, homeownership may be out of reach, but legacy is not. Traveling somewhere new, creating art, building chosen families or simply protecting one's mental health can be more fulfilling than any material milestone.

This is the shift that unsettles older generations: a vision of the American dream untethered from property or possessions, rooted instead in lived experience and personal autonomy.

The outrage over the no-contact trend is a convenient distraction from a more complex truth: The cost of American life has reached a breaking point. That pressure has strained relationships and has forced difficult choices. Time and emotional energy have become more valuable resources.

For some young adults, choosing not to attend a stressful family gathering and opting instead for rest, travel or solitude is not selfish. It's self-preservation. Do we really want to spend the holidays enduring judgment from relatives we barely know, simply to honor tradition?

Family obligations are often the most resented part of American life, yet many continue them out of guilt rather than desire. Some comply and complain. Others quietly opt out. And it's the latter group – those who choose differently – who are most harshly judged.

Andrew Sciallo is a college English professor at The City University of New York-Hunter, the Borough of Manhattan Community College and Pace University. His writing has appeared in The Nation, the Los Angeles Times, The Advocate and Queerty. *Provided By Andrew Sciallo*

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The American family isn't collapsing. It's adapting to an economic reality that leaves little room for the old rules. What looks like decline is, in fact, evolution.

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