

Americans idolize model family but see limits, study shows: Recognizing gap between ideals and reality

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A new survey shows that even as Americans have become more accepting of nontraditional family structures, their view of the ideal family has remained the same—a heterosexual couple, married for life, with children.

The survey, commissioned by the PBS program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, was conducted by the Washington polling firm Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. It forms the basis for a four-week series on the public-television show that began the weekend of October 28.

Findings released to the press show “that there is a significant gap between what we call beliefs and reality” about the family, said pollster Anna Greenberg, who designed the survey. “Nearly everyone in this country supports what we would call the ‘traditional family,’” Greenberg continued, noting that 71 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “God’s plan for marriage is one man, one woman, for life.”

However, only 22 percent of respondents agreed that divorce is a sin, 49 percent said it is OK for couples to live together without intending to get married, and 40 percent agreed that it is “a good idea for a couple who intend to get married to live together first.” A large majority of respondents remain opposed to marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples.

“There’s a very strong—some might even say romanticized—vision of what family life should look like,” Greenberg told reporters. “Yet, there is a very strong realization of what family life actually looks like.”

For instance, 52 percent of respondents said that divorce is “usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their marriage problems.” That figure

included 38 percent of those in “traditional marriages,” defined as a heterosexual couple in their first marriage with children at home.

Greenberg also noted that divorce rates are similar if one compares the population at large with evangelical Protestants and traditionalist Catholics. “If you are more religiously conservative . . . you are not less likely to get divorced and in some cases more likely to get divorced,” she said.

The survey found that less than 20 percent of respondents were never-divorced married couples with children at home. Another 27 percent were married and never divorced but with no children living at home.

The tension between the ideals for marriage and the reality means that despite changes in society, institutions charged with defining societal ideals have held their ground in the area of family life, said John Green, who helped conduct the study. Green is a professor of political science at the University of Akron and an expert on American religion. “On the other hand, Americans have become much, much more tolerant of deviations from that ideal, I suspect because they themselves have experienced those deviations.”

The survey was conducted between July 25 and August 7 and involved 1,130 adults across the nation. -*Associated Baptist Press*