**Singles Nation: Why so many Americans are unmarried?**

Singles now outnumber married adults in the US. What's behind that social shift – and why it matters. By Stephanie Hanes, Correspondent June 14, 2015

Boston — When Karin Denison was in her early 20s, it seemed that all her peers were coupling up and planning to live happily ever after. She spent the summers after college driving to friends’ weddings, she recalls. In small-town Minnesota, marriage was just what people did. It was expected.

Today, almost two decades, hundreds of dates, and untold hours on OKCupid later, Ms. Denison, who moved to Boston when she was 26, lives in a far different reality.

“There are tons of single people in Boston,” she says. “You can be single in Boston and nobody really cares. I’ve never felt the pressure here to get married.”

Indeed, if there is any “normal” in the shifting, complicated world of American relationships, it arguably looks a lot more like Denison than her childhood friends who wed at 21. Last year, for the first time, the number of unmarried American adults outnumbered those who were married. One in 7 lives alone – about 31 million compared with 4 million in 1950 – and many of those are clustered in urban centers.

But even outside cities, there is a distinct rise of the “single.” Almost half of new births are to unmarried mothers. The number of parents living together but not married has tripled. And the number of American adults who have never been married is at a historic high, around 20 percent.

Meanwhile, only 30 percent of Millennials say that having a successful marriage is “one of the most important things” in life, according to the Pew Research Center, down from even the 47 percent of Generation X who said the same thing in 1997. Four in 10 Americans went ever further, telling Pew researchers in 2010 that marriage was becoming obsolete.

In short, academics say, American society is in the midst of a fundamental social and demographic shift, the “greatest social change of the last 60 years that we haven't already named and identified,” according to New York University sociologist Eric Klinenberg. [The original story did not include Mr. Klinenberg's full quote.] It is a shift that goes well beyond the dynamics of relationships, affecting everything from housing and health care to child rearing and churches.

And although single women like Denison – educated, urban, and leading a full life – are often portrayed as the poster children of this new nonmarital world order (think “Sex and the City” and writer Kate Bolick’s new book, “Spinster”), the reality is far more complex. The way Americans now couple – or don’t – offers insight into not only evolving views of marriage and family, but into the country’s growing economic, racial, and geographic divides.

“Just as marriages are no longer alike, singleness is no longer all alike,” says Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education at the Council on Contemporary Families.

Understanding the various facets of the ne